The Rise of Written Literature among the Roma:
A Study of the Role of Writing in the Current Re-Definition of Romani Identity with Specific Reference to the Italian Case

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DECLARATION

The section devoted to Romani women's writing further develops some crucial issues outlined in the following article:

> *L'uso femminile della scrittura fra i Roma sloveno-crǫati*, in Piasere, Leonardo, ed., *Italia Romani* (Roma: CISU, 1999), II, 147-168.

Unless otherwise stated, the translations from the *romanes* into non-Romani languages are by Romani authors. The poems format presented in the thesis is the faithful reproduction of the format in which the texts have been originally published. It is important to note that, where a poem is presented in a double format (*romanes*/non-Romani languages) this does not mean that the Romani version should necessarily precede the translation.

ABSTRACT

So far, textual hetero-representations of the Romani people (usually called 'Gypsies' by the non-Roma) have focused on their foreignness and alleged 'non-conformity' to the dominant order. Such depictions, conflating history and myth, art and reality, promote the perception of an unbridgeable divide between the 'primitive', 'illiterate' Roma and the 'civilized' society. In this respect, the forging of a fictional 'Gypsy' identity can be seen as an ethnic strategy aimed at endorsing harsh policies of oppression and social marginalization of the Roma.

The recent rise of a Romani written literature has shown that, contrary to common belief, the Roma cannot simply be defined as people 'without writing'. This thesis aims to highlight the complex features of their literature, characterized by an irreducible plurality of voices and styles which is in striking contrast with the rigid, monolithic structure of the conventional images of the 'Gypsy'.

The intertextual, hybrid features of Romani literature seem to suggest alternative ways of looking at Romani identity which substantially undermine the rigid binarism of ethnocentric definitions of the 'Gypsy'. More specifically, the study of Romani literature enables us to view Romani textual hetero- and auto-representations not as irreconcilable, mutually exclusive terms, but in the light of their interconnections and mutual influences. The adoption of a dynamic, intercultural approach is a crucial factor in our understanding of the complex features of Romani identity, and may ultimately contribute to a profound (and long due) reassessment of the troubled Roma/Gağe relationship.

INTRODUCTION

Since their first arrival in Western Europe, the Roma – commonly named 'Gypsies' by the non-Roma[1] – have been surrounded by a number of misleading stereotypes centred on their 'foreignness' and their alleged deviance from the norms of the majority society. The present study addresses such manipulation of 'Gypsy' identity as strictly related to broader strategies of socio-cultural hegemony and issues of power relations between the 'Gypsies' and the dominant society. From my perspective, textual depictions are not separate from the dynamics of social life. Rather, they are likely to play an important part in these dynamics, and may vary substantially, according to the configuration of power relations at work in a specific social context.[2] As we will see, the conflation of categories of art and social life in the definition of 'Gypsies' is instrumental in reinforcing the system of power run by the dominant group. The image of the 'primitive Gypsy', in particular, has been used as an ideological camouflage to mask policies of repression and marginalization of the 'Gypsies'.

To some extent, the close link between texts and social context is almost self-evident. Every act of writing takes place in specific physical circumstances, involves

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[1] The word 'Gypsies' is a derogatory term attributed to the Roma by the non-Roma. As for 'Gypsies'' self-definitions, there is no single etnonym but a range of designations which reflect the variety of 'Gypsy' groups across the world (e.g. *Romanichals* in England, the US, Australia and New Zeland, *Rom* or *Roma* in southern/eastern Europe, *Sinti* in Germany, Austria, central and northern Italy, southern France, *Kalé* in Spain, *Manuš* in France and so forth). In this study, especially in the first two chapters, I will make use of the term 'Gypsy' (in single inverted commas, in order to emphasize the arbitrariness of this denomination) to refer to hetero-ascribed definitions, which do not take into account the Roma's point of view on their identity. In contrast with this ethnocentric approach, I will employ the terms 'Roma' (pl.), 'Rom' (m. s.), 'Romni' (f. s.) and 'Romani' (adj.) when discussing Romani self-representations. The term used by the Roma to define the non-Roma is 'Gağe'. The words Gypsy and Gypsies (no inverted commas) will be used as 'umbrella terms' to refer to Romani groups in general.

[2] See for example the contradictory depiction of 'Gypsies' as noble/ignoble savages.

a certain network of participants and is influenced by the socio-cultural context, including current systems of values as well as symbolic and cultural representations. On a more general level, writing is also affected by the wider socio-political context, where different ideologies operate and compete in order to achieve power and hegemonic status.

> Society is not homogeneous; it is made up of different social classes and groups with competing and often conflicting interests and ideologies operating, as we see it, in a hierarchy. The dominant ideologies are those that have the power to project particular meanings and practices as universal, as 'common sense'. This power operates either by winning the consent of others (hegemony, in Gramsci's terms) or, in moments of crisis and instability, by coercion, forcing others either to follow or to avoid certain practices; the ultimate coercion being the threat of imprisonment or death.[3]

Dominant ideologies, embodied and enforced by the political institutions in power, try to impose themselves as the official, authoritative representation of social reality. On the other hand, oppositional, counter-hegemonic views and representations, if not completely suppressed, are at least marginalized and delegitimized.

Written/printed texts, in so far as they are employed in conveying and disseminating ideological representations of reality, play a crucial part in the relations of power and socio-political hegemony highlighted above. Writing is a site of competition over meaning, where representations considered to be 'compatible' with the hegemonic view are presented as self-explanatory common sense in order to monopolize public opinion, whereas minority, alternative representations strive to obtain some space for themselves. As stated by Romy Clark

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[3] See R. Clark and R. Ivanič, *The Politics of Writing* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 21.

and Roz Ivanič,

> the [written] sign reflects social struggle – not just in terms of class, [...] but also in terms of gender, ethnicity and all contested areas of social life – and is itself a site of struggle.[4]

Consequently, textual representations are never to be considered completely 'autonomous' and neutral,[5] but should constantly be referred to and interpreted within a specific context of power relations. By representing a particular definition of reality as if it were the actual real thing, written texts are likely to influence and guide the behaviour of individuals and help support what Foucault calls a 'regime of truth', which sanctions and enforces a particular set of values and beliefs considered functional to the institutions in power.[6]

As I will show, it was under the ideological regime monopolized by the Gağe (non-Roma) that stereotypical representations of the 'Gypsies' emerged as the only unchallenged repository of the 'truth' about this alleged 'mysterious' people. Liégeois emphasizes that stereotypes and legends concerning 'Gypsies', far from being confined to the literary sphere, permeate almost every area of public discourse, giving rise to a 'constant and repellent caricature of the nomad'.[7] This caricature is not only conveyed in the spoken language, but also in the written one, occurring in the pages of newspapers, schoolbooks, legal and official texts and even in dictionaries and encyclopaedias. The consequences of this phenomenon could hardly be understated: dictionaries, encyclopaedias and the press are generally regarded as authoritative reference works, based on objective representations of reality. The

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[4] Clark and Ivanič, *The Politics of Writing*, p. 29.
[5] On the critic to the 'autonomous' view see for instance B. Street, *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
[6] See. M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (Brighton: Harvester, 1980).
[7] Jean-Pierre Liégeois, *Gypsies and Travellers: Dossiers for the Intercultural Training of Teachers* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1987), p. 132.

fact that the information presented in these works as 'true' was often based on misconception and deliberate distortion is not the main point to consider here. As Hall points out, 'knowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of the "truth" but has the power to *make itself true*'.[8] This is achieved especially through the use of texts that are considered to be reliable sources of 'actual' knowledge, as highlighted by Said:

> a text purporting to contain knowledge about something actual, [...] is not easily dismissed. Expertise is attributed to it. The authority of academics, institutions, and governments can accrue to it, surrounding it with still greater prestige than its practical successes warrant. *Most important, such texts can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe.*[9]

Historical representations of the 'Gypsies' have generally focused on features such as their 'primitive' and 'wild' nature, as well as their 'asocial' and 'deviant' way of life. Early depictions of 'Gypsies' suggest a radical incongruity between 'Gypsy' diversity and medieval *Weltanschauung*. Chapter 1 presents a range of texts such as medieval bans and historical accounts, in which the 'Gypsies' are depicted as 'wild', uncivilized people, cursed by God and accused of practising sorcery and black magic. As shown in this chapter, the initial focus on the exotic cultural traits of the 'Gypsies' has been gradually replaced by emphasis on their alleged refusal to conform to the features of the nation-State, as eighteenth- and nineteenth-century representations of 'Gypsies' testify. 'Gypsies'' asociality is generally seen as a consequence of their primitive nature, which needs to be domesticated and civilized with the assistance of non-'Gypsy' institutions (as in the case of the policies enforced by Louis XIV and Maria Theresa of Austria). During the twentieth century

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[8] See. S. Hall (ed.), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1977), p. 49.
[9] E. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 94; my emphasis.

we witness a radicalization of the policies of assimilation against 'Gypsies' and their inclusion in the category of the 'social deviants'.[10] I maintain that the label of 'deviants' was applied to 'Gypsies' because it was functional to the preservation of the social order, which needs continuously to confirm its rules by means of the exclusion and the condemnation of difference and deviance.

As far as literary depictions of 'Gypsies' are concerned, they focus on the 'hybrid' nature of the 'Gypsies' – as in the case of the 'monstrous' 'Gypsy' in early modern Italian literature – and their marginal, 'wild' condition – a feature widely exploited for political and ideological purposes, from Cervantes' *Gitanilla* to Fielding's *Tom Jones*. The 'Gypsies'' unconventional way of life has always captured the imagination of the sedentary population. In particular, the popular belief in their magic powers has inspired a number of literary representations where 'Gypsy' characters are evocative of an esoteric atmosphere,[11] as well as some memorable depictions of 'Gypsies' as picturesque and romantic characters.[12] Such representations have played a crucial role in establishing a literary canon of great influence and durability. The progressive consolidation (and popularization) of a body of 'Gypsy literature'[13] favoured the emergence of a mythologized image that merged with the 'real' Roma, that is, the people from whom that image was initially drawn and subsequently removed.

The textual analysis carried out in Chapters 1 and 2 tends to shift from the Italian context to a general European perspective (which could be broadly conceived as

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[10] See the 'Gypsy' image promoted by the Nazi propaganda, discussed in Chapter 1.iv.

[11] See the 'Gypsy' characters in Sgorlon's *Calderas* and the female 'Gypsy' characters, among whom I will examine Hugo's Esmeralda, Merimee's Carmen and Pushkin's Zemfira.

[12] See the works by artists such as Pushkin and Baudelaire.

[13] In the course of this study I will oppose this 'Gypsy' literature, written by non-Roma, to the Romani literature written by Roma.

highly representative of a Western non-'Gypsy' perspective). There are at least two main reasons for this repeated shift in focus. As I argue in the first two chapters of the thesis, despite the variety of their historical backgrounds and their geographical dispersion, representations of the 'Gypsies' (both fictional and allegedly scientific ones) contribute to the same general discursive strategy elaborated and reinforced by the dominant society in relation to this ethnic group. What I mean by 'discourse' here is not confined to the linguistic domain but defines both the system of representation and the social practices concerned with the production of knowledge about the 'Gypsies', according to Foucault's conception.[14] Needless to say, the symbolic reverberations of such complex practices tend to transcend any rigid territorial delimitation and may be seen as a manifestation of a widespread ethnic strategy carried out by the Gağe to the detriment of the Roma. The perspective from which I look at issues of hetero- and self-representation aims to reflect a generalized attitude. Accordingly, the thesis focuses on the general features of the Western construction of the 'Gypsies', as well as on the typical 'Romany way' to address issues of self-expression and identity-building. However, this general overview will be also integrated with a sharper focus on particular cases of cultural and textual representations. Although the adoption of a wide perspective is essential to identify common themes and tendencies within different cultural contexts, it is at a micro-level that phenomena such as the use of writing by Romani female poets and the intertextual links between Romani and Italian literature are more easily identifiable. By dwelling exclusively on the macro-purposes of hetero- and self-depictions – that is, their role in supporting or opposing hegemonic representations – one risks

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[14] See Foucault's *Archeology of Knowledge* (trans. by A. M. Sheridan Smith (London: Tavistock, 1972)), and *Discipline and Punish* (trans. by A. M. Sheridan (London: Vintage, 1977)).

overlooking their internal differentiation and reciprocal interference. For this reason, I will pay attention to some specific cases of poetic writing by Italian Roma. An in-depth study of these cases (especially the poetic writing by Italian Gypsy women) is essential to reveal a number of alternative uses of writing and to highlight the variety of voices and styles within Romani literature.

Finally, the adoption of a transnational perspective is necessary in view of the actual features of the Romani identity, which could be defined as 'a huge diaspora embracing five continents, sharing the citizenship of a multitude of states, while lacking a territory of its own'.[15] The transnational nature of Romani identity is clearly reflected in the variety and geographical dispersion characterizing the Romani language:

> Romani is spoken in all European countries except Iceland and maybe Portugal. [...] Romani is also spoken outside Europe, especially in Americas, Australia and South Africa. It is probably the most widespread language of the European community.[16]

Such linguistic variety is echoed by the literary creations of the Roma, which are extremely widespread and fragmented, as we will see in Chapters 3 and 4.

In contrast with the variety and dynamism observed within Romani cultural and ethnic identity, dominant hetero-representations of the 'Gypsies' provide us with a fixed image whose features have hardly changed over the centuries. The fixed and immutable structure of the 'Gypsy' image is strictly connected with the cognitive features of the stereotype. Stereotypical representations are characterized by the attribution of certain physical and moral traits to individuals or entire groups on the

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[15] N. Gheorghe and T. Acton, 'Citizens of the World and Nowhere', in *Between Past and Future: The Roma of Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. by W. Guy (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2001), pp. 54-70 (p. 55).

[16] P. Bakker and H. Kyuchukov (eds), *What is the Romani language?* (Hatfield: Centre de recherches tsiganes and University of Hertfordshire Press, 2000), p. 69.

basis of arbitrary generalization and oversimplification.[17] Unlike the ordinary cognitive processes of categorization – which is a form of simplification of reality – stereotypical thinking tends to accentuate the differences between categories and to minimize intracategory differences.[18] This helps explain both the persistence of stereotypes against the Roma and the creation of a series of distorted, fixed representations which enjoyed great popularity throughout the centuries.

There appears to be a sort of common thread running through the 'Gypsy' images analysed in this study. Whether we consider the way 'Gypsies' are presented in the popular imagery or their textual and artistic interpretation, we may easily notice a constant emphasis on the 'difference' of these characters, at times deplored and sanctioned, at times admired and idealised.[19] What is invariably emphasized is their radical deviation from the habits and the values of the majority society, their strangeness and the irregularity of their way of life. This deviant behaviour is usually connected with the peculiar nature of the 'Gypsies' and is therefore perceived as fixed and ineradicable. In the eyes of the Gağe, the 'Gypsies' embody the radical Alterity.

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[17] Originally, the term 'stereotype' – from the Greek 'stereos' (stiff, hard, solid) and 'tupos' (impression, stamp, model) – referred to a process of printing in which images were replicated through the use of plates called 'stereotypes'. It was subsequently used figuratively to describe a pathological condition characterized by a pattern of obsessive repetition. At present, the term defines the process by which members of a social group are categorized through the use of highly simplified images.

[18] This phenomenon is connected with the 'principle of perceptual accentuation', which was first introduced by Tajfel and Wilkes. See H. Tajfel and A. L. Wilkes, 'Classification and Quantitative Judgement', in *Britain Journal of Psychology*, 54 (1963), 101-114.

[19] There is a striking contradiction at the heart of this conception. Despite being constantly projected outside the dominant society, the 'Gypsies' appear to remain constantly at the heart of its symbolic system. The more they are pushed to the margins, the more they become central subjects in the social discourse. As will be pointed out in Chapter 1, this contradictory representation is partly the result of a mechanism of *inversion* through which the dominant society projects onto the Roma its fears and unresolved conflicts. As for the more 'favourable' connotations of the 'Gypsy' image, they are mainly due to a process of exoticization and idealization of Gypsies characters (see Chapter 2). The profound ambivalence surrounding the 'Gypsy' image has been repeatedly emphasized by scholars such as Judith Okely, Ian Hancock and Alaina Lemon.

How did the Roma become such an appealing source of stereotypization? There seems to be a sort of vicious circle at the core of the process responsible for their status of quintessential 'Other' at the heart of European society. In the first place, it was probably the substantial *ignorance* of Romani people that generated an incredible number of stereotypes and myths about them. The progressive emergence of a body of research and studies about the 'Gypsies' did not result in any deeper knowledge of this people, as most of them were not based on any first-hand contact but merely echoed the works of former scholars.[20] Moreover, given the popularity and the fixed nature of the images of 'Gypsies', any findings which contradicted the stereotype was not likely to invalidate the general overriding paradigm. It was the distorted perception of the non-'Gypsies' that was adopted as the basis for any form of theorization and discourse about the 'Gypsies', not the empirical reality. As for Western perceptions of the Orient as a remote and inaccessible place, a 'textual attitude' imposed itself as the dominant view on 'Gypsies' and completely overshadowed any alternative self-definition.[21]

To this day, despite numerous attempts made by the non-Roma (from authorities and policy makers to ethnographers and scholars) to control the identity of the 'Gypsy', there is no general consensus about the definition and the referential status of 'Gypsiness'. What is more, there is a considerable hiatus between stigmatization of 'Gypsies' in the official (and literary) discourse and everyday reality. In daily life, 'Gypsy' identity is generally perceived in pragmatic terms. On deciding whether to define 'Gypsy' as a fascinating stranger or a dangerous intruder, the Gağe apply a rather heterogeneous range of criteria, which may vary according to the

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[20] See Wim Willems, *In Search of the True Gypsy: From Enlightenment to Final Solution* (London: Frank Cass, 1997).
[21] E. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 92.

circumstances.[22] Such continuous shifts of meaning and interpretations, as well as transpositions of 'Gypsy' images across different contexts and semantic spheres, have progressively altered the original connection of these representations with the outward reality and have eventually led to a 'referential fallacy'.[23]

Failure to produce a satisfactory appraisal of Romani identity is also due to intrinsic problems of denomination and cognitive categorization. 'Identity', 'ethnicity' and 'culture' are fuzzy categories, whose constitutive traits are not clearly delimited. This is because they do not rigidly correspond to any 'natural', pre-existing entity but are the result of multiple processes of cultural invention. In the

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[22] At times the pursuit of a nomadic life is considered the necessary trait identifying a 'Gypsy', although the presence of other travellers (such as the New Age Travellers) or the growing tendency towards sedentarization among European Roma make it difficult to apply this categorization in a satisfactory way. Traits related to specific occupations (such as metal working, fortune-telling, dancing and so forth) may occasionally be regarded as 'pertinent' to the definition of 'Gypsy'. Historical circumstances are also likely to be a major factor in establishing the identity of a 'Gypsy', especially in those areas where the presence of the Roma is deeply rooted in the non-Roma context and there are strong links between Roma and the local population. As for the literary image of the 'Gypsies', the traditional representation of 'Gypsies' as genuine performers and artists is still deeply rooted in the popular imagination (and it is also frequently exploited by Romani artists). However, this positive connotation is mostly confined to the artistic realm, and is likely to be completely inverted as soon as conflicting issues arise in the socio-political context. In situations of tension or ethnic struggle, in particular, 'Gypsy' becomes synonymous with 'stranger', 'outsider', that is, a negative label which does not take into account any form of self-definition on the Roma's side. In other words, the term 'Gypsy' has lost any referential denotation and may assume different meanings, depending on the context. In any event, the Roma are aprioristically denied the right to define themselves – the act of 'naming' and 'classifying' being considered a prerogative of the dominant group.

[23] As suggested by Sandland discrepancies and contradictions in the use of the term 'Gypsy' contribute to convey the idea that the genuine 'Gypsy' 'does and does not exists; is and is not an ethnic category; is, in short, a moment of pure *differance*' (R. Sandland, 'The Real, the Simulacrum, and the Construction of 'Gypsy' in Law', in *Journal of Law and Society* (23) 1996, 383-405 (p. 396)). In this perspective, instead of talking of the 'death' of the referent we may refer to its 'overambiguation', which is the result of a sort of 'unlimited semiosis', an infinite regression of the 'Gypsy' into a 'simulacrum', an empty receptacle with no autonomous life in itself. A different explanation for the 'referential fallacy' mentioned above is provided by Alaina Lemon in her study of Gypsy performance (see A. Lemon, *Between Two Fires: Gypsy Performance and Romani Memory from Pushkin to Postsocialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000)). As the author points out, Russian representations of 'Gypsies' are characterized by continuous shifts from 'staged' to 'real' life. Consequently, Gypsy art (from craft to music and theatrical performance) is metonimically interpreted as a faithful depiction of real Gypsy culture and life: Gypsies are regarded by the Gağe as 'natural performers', whether they use their theatrical talent for artistic purposes or, less romantically, to carry out their dishonest trades. As Lemon argues, these semantic shifts should not be seen as mere linguistic phenomena, as they are actually embedded and 'performed' within social relations. This means that, to be fully informative, the analysis of the process of cultural representations cannot be

case of the Roma, their identities have been repeatedly altered and manipulated to accommodate the policies of the dominant group. This is particularly evident if we consider the widespread reliance on fictional representations of 'Gypsies' and the emphasis on denominations which are completely extraneous to Romani self-definitions. Persistent, quiescent adherence to extrinsic, 'etic' representations and unawareness of 'emic' categories and conceptual frames are among the main factors of the 'enigma' surrounding 'Gypsy' identity.[24]

The difficulties encountered in defining and interpreting effectively notions of 'ethnic identity' concerning Romani people are not likely to be adequately appreciated unless we perform an epistemological turn, a change of paradigm in our conception of identity and cultural diversity. The study of Romani literature seems to provide us with the unique opportunity to perform such a cognitive turn and to reconsider critically our perception of the Romani identity, hitherto reduced to a stereotypical dimension. The flexible, hybrid nature of this literature, which I have defined as a 'polyphony' – a dynamic combination of various voices and styles – is in sharp contrast with the representation of 'Gypsies' as 'primitive' people with no autonomous views on their own culture.

Contrary to common opinion, the Roma cannot be simply dismissed as a 'people without writing'. Chapters 3 and 4 analyse the rise of Romani written literature in

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confined to the intrinsic, linguistic limitations of the representational process but should be linked up with the social context in which this process takes place.

[24] The emic/etic distinction was first introduced by Kenneth Pike in his *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior* (The Hague: Mouton, 1967) and derives from the linguistic distinction between phonemic (sound difference producing meaning difference) and phonetic difference. In general, anthropologists use this distinction to differentiate between two distinct approaches to human behaviour. While an emic perspective is 'one that favors the point of view of the members of the community under study and hence tries to describe how members assign meaning to a given act or to the difference between two different acts', an etic perspective is 'one which is instead culture-independent and simply provides a classification of behaviors on the basis of a set of features devised by the observer/researcher' (quoted in Alessandro Duranti, *Linguistic Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p 172).

association with the emergence of a movement of intellectuals engaged in the preservation of the *romanes* (the Romani language), and the diffusion of a better knowledge of the Romani people. The texts examined in these chapters are mainly *poetic* texts. As I will explain in Chapter 3, this choice is directly linked to issues of prestige and 'literariness'. Romani poets tend to regard poetry as the literary genre *par excellence* and seem to consider it particularly suitable to address a Gağe readership.[25]

The aim of Romani writing, which is mainly focused on the celebration of the Roma's way of life and their traditions, is to contrast the stereotypical images produced by the Gağe with the Roma's self-representations. Such representations aim to challenge in particular the discriminatory attitude of the majority population, as well as the persistent manipulation of the Romani identity and its substitution with a number of fictitious 'Gypsy' images. In opposition to the Gağe's view of the 'Gypsies' as a people with no sense of the past and no separate identity, the Roma propose the image of a people acutely aware of their history and of their present condition. In their texts, Romani poets consciously engage in a dialogic re-negotiation of their self-image and strive to affirm their own – hitherto unheard – voice within the ongoing debate over their identity. In addition to the counter-hegemonic purpose underlying Romani writing, I observe the use of literary images for purposes which are not directly related to Gağe's hetero-representations, but refer to issues of power relations *within* Romani society and, more specifically, to issues of personal identity and self-expression. The case of Romani female poetry is a typical example of this 'personal' use of writing. Instead of limiting themselves to

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[25] As far as the Italian context is concerned, see also the crucial role played by Croce's aesthetic in establishing poetry – lyrical poetry in particular – as the very essence of artistic creation.

an instrumental manipulation of the written medium, Romani women seem to rely on writing to avoid the numerous restrictions imposed on their behaviour within their group. For the Sinta Paula Schöpf, for example, the writing process coincides with a journey of self-discovery, a search for human understanding that transcends the Roma/Gağe opposition. As we will see, the 'interstitial' condition of Romani women, marginalized in their communities as well as in non-Romani society, enables them to find a symbolic, 'uncharted' space within which they can re-negotiate their identity and express their alternative *Weltanschauung*.

Romani writing is a multifaceted phenomenon that cannot be adequately approached through the conventional categories usually applied by the non-'Gypsies' when referring to 'Gypsy' culture. As we will see in Chapters 1 and 2, texts written by the Gağe about the 'Gypsies' display a monolithic structure which reduces the Romani identity to a question of 'non-conformity' with the dominant order. In such texts, the Roma's cultural diversity is utterly suppressed and symbolically labelled as a radical 'Otherness'. On the other hand, Romani self-representations are characterized by a 'dialogic' structure that aims at 'reinventing' the Romani image through a process of textual hybridization and literary 'bricolage'. In the course of my analysis, I will contrast these two uses of writing and their underlying cultural framework. However, my intention is not merely to emphasize the incompatibility between the two representational systems. Rather, I intend to identify some cases of interference and textual interconnection between them. In particular, I will look at Romani writing and at its dominant features in the light of their intertextual links with Gağe's literary traditions. As I try to show, the creative reinterpretation of conventional images by Romani authors, far from being merely a negation or a re-enactment of the fictional identity forged by the non-Roma, represents a powerful

affirmation of the dignity of the Romani people. It also contributes to the identification of alternative ways to define the complex features of the Romani identity and its relations with the mainstream culture. As will be illustrated in Chapter 5, the liminal position occupied by Romani authors in between Romani and Gağe culture, together with their use of literary bricolage and intertextual strategies, reveal a highly dynamic conception of literature which relies on writing as a site of *negotiation* of Romani identity – a use that diverges from Gağe's textual strategies of ethnic assimilation.

The analysis of Roma's 'interstitial' aesthetics, characterized by recurrent intercultural interference and hybridization, urges us to replace our view of Romani Alterity with a different approach, based on a deeper understanding of Romani culture and society. The study of Romani literary representations is pertinent to this aim, as it enables us to include the Roma's view in the general discourse about their identity and move away from the reductive caricature of the 'Gypsies'. This integrated approach combining the Gağe's view with the Roma's self-definitions, this anthropological 'crossing of gazes', may represent the key to an effective encounter between Roma and non-Roma.

1 BETWEEN HISTORY AND MYTH: HISTORICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE 'GYPSIES'' PRESENCE IN WESTERN EUROPE

Any attempt to reconstruct the history of the 'Gypsy' presence in Europe would manifest itself as a highly problematic undertaking, likely to raise more questions than answers. In the course of the centuries, countless versions of this history have been accumulating and a substantial agreement is still far from being reached.

On the other hand, what we mean by 'Gypsy history' is not immediately evident and therefore needs additional clarification. As we shall see, the commonly divulged 'history of the Gypsies' is in reality the history written by the Gağe. As a result, such historical reconstruction is influenced by the idea of the existence of a history *par excellence*, that is, a written history, as opposed to a history of secondary nature, confined to the realm of orality and thus not susceptible to verification. In a Western perspective, history is immediately associated with writing. It relies on written documents to be transmitted and catalogued, in accordance with a pattern that should enable us to ideally draw a linear path tracing back the origins of any human population on earth. Needless to say, this approach is too restrictive and ethnocentric to claim anthropological validity, as it does not take into account the Roma's version of their own history. It overestimates written history, with no consideration towards the validity of traditional, orally transmitted history.

Documentary history, based on verbalised records, has been regarded for a long time as the only reliable basis for historical reconstruction. Even among ethnohistorians, whose studies are specifically focused on non-literate societies, we could notice a conspicuous tendency to undervalue any other source of evidence except writing. However, the widespread inclination to consider factual credibility as a monopoly of written documents has been recently challenged and criticized as

inadequate and patently misleading (not to mention the problematic epistemological status of notions such as 'evidence' and 'factual objectivity', currently a matter of intense debate).

As Ong has recently pointed out, 'a present-day literate usually assumes that written records have more force than spoken words as evidence of a long-past state of affairs', whereas 'earlier cultures that knew literacy but had not so fully interiorized it, have often assumed quite the opposite'.[1] It is worth noting that the 'earlier cultures' to which the author refers are not people on their first encounter with literacy, but people living in eleventh- and twelfth-century England. Recalling Clanchy's research on the uses of literacy,[2] Ong emphasizes that the use of written documentation for administrative purposes was still regarded with some perplexity, as oral testimony was generally credited with more credibility: 'witnesses were *prima facie* more credible than texts because they could be challenged and made to defend their statements, whereas texts could not'.[3] It was not until recently, then, that writing gained its privileged status as the official means of recording events. However, writing is still undoubtedly perceived as the crucial factor determining all that is credible within a context of historical reconstruction.

The Roma have not left behind them a trail of written records to testify meticulously their passage through sedentary societies: their tradition does not rely on writing to represent past events. Despite this lack of records, which makes any historical reconstruction inevitably incomplete, images of 'Gypsies' are a recurrent presence in the imagination of the host society, becoming an integral part of its

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[1] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 96.

[2] M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066-1307* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1979).

[3] See note 1 above.

cultural and literary representations. From this point of view, their presence within Europe is incontestable, and we would fail to understand a significant part of European culture and history if we did not consider our encounter with 'Gypsies'.

To investigate the features of the 'Gypsies'' presence within Western sedentary societies means also to analyse and reconstruct the features of the latter's attitude towards alternative patterns of settlement and occupation. This attitude, based on Western *Weltanschauung*, is strictly related to our self-representation and our views on cultural diversity.

The following analysis of the various representations of 'Gypsies' will reveal a persistent stereotypical pattern that has deeply influenced the Western perception of the Other. At the root of this perception lies a subtle mechanism of inversion: as in a complex series of reflecting mirrors, we tend to perceive ourselves as opposed to others, or rather to the *image* of the Other, which is an artefact achieved through an outward projection of our mirrored Self. Consequently, our representations of alterity are likely to be the result of an inverted image of ourselves, rather than a real diversity.

The same principle applies to the images of 'Gypsies', whose identity has always been depicted as mysterious, in so far as it is grounded mostly in fictional representations, and therefore easily subject to the mechanism of inversion. They are constantly represented as 'lacking' all the constitutive elements of our civilization, such as a written history, a nation, and a unified language. We need to depict them in these terms to confirm ourselves, our 'stable' identity.

The reiteration of this perverted mirroring over the centuries resulted in a progressive disguise of reality: a process of ethnic 'camouflage', where silences and omissions are not less meaningful than the 'official' testimonies.

As Judith Okely points out, there are roughly two kinds of records about 'Gypsies': the 'legalistic' and the 'exotic'.[4] From one side, we are presented with legal records and official reports and banishments, which testify the restrictive and repressive tendency of governments and their vain attempts to keep 'Gypsies' under control or even to eliminate them physically. From this point of view, the history of 'Gypsies' coincides with the history of the persecution and the racism perpetrated against them.

On the other hand there are the literary sources – illustrated in detail in Chapter 2 – which are no less misleading than the historical accounts. Far from being a productive source of information on 'Gypsy' identity and history, the dominant literary representations of 'Gypsies' are a reflection of Western cosmology, an indirect way of investigating the ambivalent fashion in which 'Gypsies' have been perceived from time to time, as a dangerous threat or as the symbolic incarnation of liberty and positive adherence to the laws of nature.

(i) Historical accounts of the 'Gypsy' presence in Western Europe

As we will see, in medieval and Renaissance European society there was no right of asylum for the banished 'Gypsies'. Their first encounter with the settled population generated a reaction marked by suspicion and anxiety, often exploited and unrealistically accentuated to foment the so-called 'Gypsy scare'. But what was the real nature of this fear? In this study I maintain that such an attitude should be seen

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[4] Judith Okely, *The Traveller-Gypsies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 1.

as an implicit refusal to face the reality of Diversity and Otherness, rather than a reaction to an actual 'threat'.

The attitude towards 'Gypsies' was generally characterised by a total rejection. They were perceived as a problem of public order, a social nuisance, but in no circumstances a subject of a proper interaction, of an intercultural dialectic. The perception of 'Gypsy' culture as 'inferior' and 'deficient', or, in Todorov's words,[5] the collocation of 'Gypsies' in an axiological perspective of political and cultural hegemony precluded any kind of cultural exchange.

In medieval society 'diversity' was not taken into consideration because it was not congruent with the current patterns of thought, at that time strongly influenced by Aristotelian philosophical categories. '*Natura non fecit saltus*',[6] said the voice of the Authority: 'There are no gaps within God's creation'. Any incongruity in the perfect design of the Creator was simply inconceivable, any detected unconformity was perceived as a deviancy caused by corruption of the Edenic, original condition. In other words, any difference was not perceived *qua* difference, but as related to and derived from a former condition of uniformity and flawless perfection. However, this view of human diversity should not lead us to the conclusion that medieval and Renaissance society were characterized by some kind of monolithic unity. As Boon has opportunely pointed out,

> it is true that in many cultural domains, the so-called medieval mind – like any 'mind', or rather *mentalité*, or rather culture – rejected certain possibilities. [...] But against these restrictions, we must consider what was allowed: polyphony, a trichotomy of monastic-ecclesiastic-temporal modes of authority, property, and legitimacy (...), and communal ascetic renouncers (anchorites), who stood in contrast to the solitary renunciation

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[5] Tzvetan Todorov, *La conquête de l'Amérique. La question de l'autre* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), p. 191.

[6] See the Aristotelian principle according to which nature is characterized by an unbroken continuum. Later, this principle was to be found within medieval scolasticism. See also C. von Linné, *Philosophia Botanica* (chap. XXVII), G.W. Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*.

> that came to dominate some Eastern reaches of related Indo-European religious traditions.[7]

In medieval time nomadism was usually regarded with suspicion and generally discouraged, the sedentary condition being perceived as the 'normal' pattern of settlement of an individual. As Geremek emphasized,

> in the social imagination of people of the Middle Ages, the fact of living in one place, of being rooted lastingly in the same locality and in the same community of persons, had a positive value, since people's sense of order and social security was founded on blood ties and neighborly connections.[8]

However, the general condemnation that surrounded nomadism as such did not result in a complete eradication of this phenomenon within medieval society. 'Fixity' and 'immobility' are not the most appropriate conceptual keys to depict effectively the general features of the medieval world. Historians of this period have instead contributed to a more appropriate representation of the Middle Ages as characterised by profound political and socio-economical changes. Medieval patterns of settlement were typical of a dynamic society: continuous flows of people covered incessantly the routes from town to town, forming a heterogeneous population of day workers, beggars and pilgrims. There were numerous reasons that led them to the margins of settled society: economic factors overlapped with religious, socio-economic and cultural motivations. The reaction of the sedentary population to these various types of itinerancy could vary noticeably, and if nomadism was commonly perceived as a negative element of instability, in many cases it was accepted both as a sign and a means of moral elevation (as in the case of

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[7] J. Boon, *Other Tribes, Other Scribes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 36.
[8] See B. Geremek, 'The Marginal Man', in J. Le Goff (ed.), *The Medieval World*, trans. by Lydia G. Cochrane (London: Collins&Brown, 1990), pp. 346-373 (p. 348).

pilgrims and hermits, who embodied the ideal of the dantesque *homo viator*).

Marginality, in other words, was a broad category which included an incredible variety of individuals. But the fact that they were 'marginal', to use Geremek's terminology,[9] – whether due to banishment, expulsion, economic conjuncture or voluntary choice – made them cross the threshold of civil society and enter the dimension of the unstructured, the realm of wilderness, which was associated with arcane and evil entities. The symbolic opposition between Nature and Culture, that is, between the dimension of civilization and that of primitivism and wilderness was interpreted in terms of an ethical polarity. In fact, it was a powerful device of social marginalization and exclusion of the undesired.

The patterns of exclusion adopted by Western society towards 'Gypsies' lead us to further reflect on a crucial event that marked the historical period under consideration. Not long after the arrival of 'Gypsies' in the West, European navigators were to make their first appearance among the peoples of the newly discovered Americas. 1492 is a date of great historical and symbolic significance to the aims of this work, as it signifies the beginning of a new crucial phase in the history of Europe, an era of great scientific and geographical discoveries. Gradually, as geographical exploration and voyages were broadening the boundaries of the known world, Europeans reached an increasing awareness of ethnographic variety. However, a notion of cultural relativism was still far from being introduced: the discovery of ethnic diversity did not coincide with the actual recognition and the appreciation of such a diversity, which required a significant shift in the anthropological conceptions of the time. The discovery of America did not correspond to the actual appreciation of a New culture: explorers and travellers

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[9] See Geremek, pp. 346-373.

initially saw and described a reality filtered through a specific *Weltanschauung* that turned out to be incompatible with ethnographic diversity. The cultural plurality of mankind was irreducible to the dominant view of the time, which still perceived any deviancy from its canons as a sign of moral degradation and identified the bounds of Civilization with those of Christendom. Bewildered and disconcerted by the encounter with an Otherness which lay beyond their experience and their cultural categories, European explorers merely levelled all the cultural 'anomalies' recorded under the label of the 'savagism' (a large category embracing anything perceived as 'unusual' and socially 'deviant'). As will be shown in the case of 'Gypsies', such representations were not just a matter of pure invention, but they functioned as a form of intellectual appropriation of the image of the Other that was to be followed by colonial domination.

The cognitive devices upholding European ethnocentrism were by no means circumscribed to the colonial context: they were also applied to more 'domestic' savages, that is, the minority groups living in the 'Old Continent'. In the same year of the discovery of America, the king of Spain Ferdinand of Aragon decreed the expulsion of Jews, Moors and 'Gypsies' from the country, a decision aggravated in 1499 by the *Medina del Campo Pragmatic*, which inflicted on 'Gypsies' punishments such as one hundred lashes after the first unheeded warning, and the cutting of the ears, with the addition of a 60 day prison sentence, if they refused to leave. We are therefore bound to acknowledge, within the same period of European history, the existence of two contradictory tendencies: fanaticism and intolerance coexisted with the discovery of new horizons for humankind. Unfortunately for 'Gypsies', they had to constantly face the first of these two tendencies. Apart from an initial stage during which they found hospitality as pilgrims and penitents,

'Gypsies' were going to be labelled as a threat to the public order, as nothing but a band of criminals. The formation of the modern nation state brought with it the creation of a complex, centralized structure, whose elaborate mechanisms required a continuous work of supervision, monitoring and consolidation. The rapid succession of wars and the aggressive conduct of foreign policies that characterized this period involved the development of an extensive and pervasive system of taxation, which entailed the exertion of a strict control over the national population. Charles V was just going to begin the creation of the 'Empire where the sun never set' (a clear reminder of the Holy Roman Empire) which combined and embodied both a supra-national vocation and a rigid policy of containment and marginalization of the foreign.

The period between the sixteenth and the eighteenth century was characterized by a progressive intensification of persecution and growing intolerance towards 'Gypsies'. The demarcation of the national borders led to their expulsion as a potential source of disorder and destabilization. In order to achieve the aim of political unity, it was necessary to achieve in the first place a certain degree of cultural homogeneity within the existing population, as well as setting out a clear definition of what was inside and outside the border of the nation-State – of what belonged to the realm of Culture and what was beyond the threshold of Civility and thus had to be tamed and civilized. From this point of view, the condition of the 'Gypsies', even though they were situated at the very heart of European civilization, was not very different from that of the 'savages' encountered by Columbus after his landing on what he considered to be the Indies.

There are hundreds of early testimonies and bans against 'Gypsies' which date from their first appearance in Western Europe. Despite their large number and

geographic distribution, they all show remarkable similarities in their content and tone: they read like the endless rehearsal of a recurrent representation. In other words, they could be interpreted as variants of the same repertoire, a bit like the safe-conducts shown by 'Gypsies' during their movements across Europe. From the very beginning, the Western discourse on 'Gypsies' is characterized by a striking fixity, a sort of reiteration of a common theme. This sort of homogeneity, which is typical of stereotypical thought, enables us, through the analysis of some of these texts, to trace an image of 'Gypsies' that is highly representative of the way they were perceived by the host populations.

The aim of the following analysis is not to produce an exhaustive account of the 'Gypsy' presence in Western Europe, but to draw from the selected texts some indications of the images of 'Gypsies' during this historical period. The texts focus intentionally on the Italian scenario (to reflect the emphasis placed on Italian Roma in the section on Romani self-representations). The 'Italian case' has been chosen as a typical example of the 'textual attitude' displayed by the Gağe towards the 'Gypsies'. The Italian states, despite being divided and opposed by an unremitting struggle for hegemony, were nevertheless united in enforcing similar policies of persecution and banishment of the 'Gypsies' from their territories. This approach 'translated' itself into a number of texts (such as bans, decrees and bureaucratic documents) which relied on a generalized 'idiom of control'[10] aimed at preserving the dominant order. In this context, writing is conceived primarily as a means of control and repression of the 'Gypsies'' diversity. The authority and the alleged historical objectivity of the written text function as textual strategies supporting the hegemonic view on the Other. As we will see, these texts do not simply 'report' on

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[10] See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 139.

the presence of 'Gypsies', but locate (or, better to say, dislocate) their diversity on an axiological level. By describing the 'Gypsies' as 'savage', 'ugly' and 'primitive', the authors express a value judgement based on an ethnocentric definition of the Other. From this point of view, the Italian case is representative of a more general Western tendency to repress and marginalize cultural and ethnic diversity. This repressive use of writing emerges clearly from the structure of the texts presented in this chapter. The examples to which I will refer tend to regard 'Gypsies'' ethno-cultural features as a problem to be addressed either through expulsion or through forced assimilation into a more 'civilized' way of living. In particular, such texts insist on the exotic, 'deviant' features of this people. Even where their primitive status is idealized, the 'Gypsies' are constantly portrayed as a group unwilling to 'fit in', and their lack of conformity with the hegemonic system is interpreted as 'anomalous'. This is particularly evident in early (fifteenth- and sixteenth-century) hetero-representations of 'Gypsies', which laid the basis for the creation of a number of 'Gypsy myths' that have survived almost unaltered up to the present. The remarkable endurance of these legends (for instance those concerning the curse of Cain and the devilish nature of 'Gypsy magic')[11] testifies to the unfavourable attitude surrounding the 'Gypsies' over the centuries, an attitude still marked by an ambiguous and irrational connotation, more than by a serious, realistic approach to their culture.

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[11] See Chapter 2.iii.

(i.i) 'La più brutta gente che si vedesse mai' (the ugliest people ever seen). Medieval first encounters and reactions

18 luglio 1422

A dì 18 luglio 1422 venne in Bologna un duca di Egitto, il quale aveva nome Andrea e venne con donne, putti ed uomini del suo paese e potevano essere ben cento persone. Il qual duca aveva rinegata la fede christiana. E il re d'Ungheria prese la sua terra e lui. Esso duca disse al detto re di voler tornare alla fede christiana, e così si battezzò con alquanti di quel popolo e furono circa 4000 uomini. Quei che non si vollero battezzare furono morti. Dappoichè il re d'Ungheria gli ebbe presi e ribattezzati, volle che andassero per lo mondo sette anni, et che dovessero andare a Roma al papa e poscia tornassero in loro paese. Quando coloro arrivarono in Bologna erano andati cinque anni pel mondo, e n'era morto di loro più della metà. Avevano un decreto del re di Ungheria, che era imperatore, per vigore di cui essi poteano rubare per tutti quei sette anni per tutto dove andassero, e che non potesse essere fatta loro giustizia. Sicchè quando arrivarono a Bologna, alloggiarono alla porta Galliera dentro e difuori, e dormivano sotto i portici, salvo che il duca alloggiava nell'albergo del re. Stettero in Bologna quindici giorni. In quel tempo molta gente andava a vederli per rispetto della moglie del duca, che sapeva indovinare e dir quello che una persona doveva avere in sua vita, e anche quello che aveva al presente e quanti figliuoli, e se una femmina era cattiva o buona, e altre cose. Di cose assai diceva il vero. [...] *Costoro erano dei più fini ladri che fossero al mondo.* [...] Nota che *questa era la più brutta genìa, che mai fosse in queste parti. Erano magri e negri e mangiavano come porci.*[12]

Eodem millesimo [1422] venerunt Forlivium quedam gentes missae ab imperatore, cupientes recipere fidem nostram et fuerunt in Forlivium die VII. Augusto. Et, ut audivi, aliqui dicebant quod erant de India. Et steterunt hinc inde per due dies *gentes non multum morigeratae, sed quasi bruta animalia et furentes*. Et fuerunt numero quasi ducenti, et ibant versus Romam ad Papam, scilicet viri et mulieres et pargoli.[13]

The first written records testifying to the presence of 'Gypsies' in Italy date from the first half of the fifteenth century.[14] The *Corpus Chronicorum Bononiensium* (see note 12) describes the arrival in Bologna, on 18 July 1422, of a group of about one hundred 'Gypsies' (men, women and children), led by Andrew, the 'Duke of Little Egypt'. They carried with them a letter of protection[15] by Sigismund, Emperor of

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[12] *Corpus Chronicorum Bononiensium*, quoted in L. A. Muratori (ed.), *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, 25 vols (Milan: 1723-1751), XVIII (1730), 611; my emphasis.

[13] *Chronicon fratris Hieronymu de Forolivio*, quoted in Muratori, *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, XIX (1731), 890; my emphasis.

[14] Although there are several etymological derivations that seem to refer to an earlier presence of 'Gypsies' in Italy, they do not provide us with any precise dating source.

[15] During the Middle Ages, when charity was considered a way of obtaining divine blessing and spiritual benefits, it was fairly common among the numerous populace of wandering people of the time to hold documents – authentic or forged – of this kind. 'Gypsies' were no exception to this practice. The text of one of those 'Letters of Protection', dated 1423, states: 'Came in person into our presence our faithful Ladislaus, *waynoda Ciganorum* [the word means 'local ruler'] with other pertaining to him, who presented their very humble supplications to us, here in Zips in our presence.

Germany and King of Bohemia,[16] granting them free passage. By virtue of this safe-conduct they were authorized to wander 'throughout the world for seven years' and to steal with impunity in order to sustain themselves.[17] According to the *Cronica*, they installed themselves 'within and without the *Galliera* gate' and remained in Bologna for fifteen days. They claimed the *status* of pilgrims who, having abandoned and subsequently returned to the Christian religion, undertook a journey of expiation as act of repentance.[18]

The fragment of the *Cronica Bononiensis* mentioned above raises a number of questions about these penitents. Some of these questions will be here examined in detail, while some others will be addressed later on in the course of this inquiry. The *Cronica* relates some characteristics ascribed to 'Gypsies' whose origins and explanation can be found in the traditional imagery of the time, and that are bound to recur frequently throughout the ages, living on well into our present days.

It will be useful to begin our examination of this text with the analysis of the passage in which 'Gypsies' are attributed an 'animal-like quality': they '*mangiavano come porci*' (ate like pigs). The boundary between humanity and animality has always been one of the main symbolic devices through which people define

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[...] In consequence we, being persuaded by their supplication, have thought proper to grant them this privilege: each time that the said voivode Ladislaus and his people shall come into our said possessions, be it free cities or fortified towns, from that time we strictly entrust and order to your present fidelities that you may favour and keep without any hindrance or trouble the said voivode Ladislaus and the Cigani who are subject to him; and by all means preserve them from any impediments and vexations. If any variance or trouble should occur among themselves, then neither you or any other of you, but the same voivode Ladislaus, should have the power of judging and absolving [...]'. Quoted in A. Fraser, *The 'Gypsies'* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p.75.

[16] Sigismund (1368-1437), king of Hungary since 1387, was crowned king of Bohemia in 1420.

[17] Sebastian Münster confirmed the existence of this safe-conduct in his *Cosmographia universalis* (1550), relating his encounter with some 'Gypsies' near Heidelberg, on which occasion he was shown a copy of the document. (Cf. D. M. M. Bartlett, 'Münster's *Cosmographia universalis*', *Journal of the 'Gypsy' Lore Society*, 31 (1952), pp. 83-90).

[18] This group was not destined to stay for long in Bologna. Brother Hieronimus recorded the arrival, on the 7th of August 1422, of people sent by the Emperor (perhaps the same pilgrims recorded in Bologna) through the city of Forlì on their way to Rome, where they were due to see the Pope Martin V to seek indulgence. There are no records of their actual arrival in Rome. Five years later, in 1427,

themselves and the world around them. As a cultural strategy that plays a fundamental role in the definition of identity, this device has been widely adopted and manipulated by human groups. Its features are therefore likely to vary considerably according to the different historical and cultural settings examined. When 'Gypsies' made their first appearance in Western Europe, they entered at the same time a cultural and symbolic frame, that of medieval popular thought, characterized by a peculiar conception of the human/animal opposition.

Early medieval thinkers tried to set a clear demarcation line between what was characteristic of humans and what was bestial.[19] The general view on this subject, however, began gradually to shift toward quite a different position, as attested by the growing popularity of monstrous races within medieval and Renaissance art and literature. Hybrids, creatures lingering on an ambiguous borderline between humanity and animality found in medieval imagery constituted what the theologians considered impossible: the blending between the realm of the human and the non-human. People with animal traits and monsters combining features of different species brought to light a 'missing link' within the 'great chain of beings' – the creation. But the large number of strange creatures such as werewolves, giants, sciopods, cynocephalies, manticores that began to fill the bestiaries were considered far more than just ridiculous figments of the imagination. They signified the advent

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the company of Duke Andrew is recorded in Paris, but it is not possible to ascertain the veracity of this fact.

[19] Saint Augustine in *The City of God*, chapter 8, maintained that 'We are supposing these stories about various races who differ from one another and from us to be true; but possibly they are not; for if we were not aware that apes, and monkeys, and sphynxes are not men, but beasts, those historians would possibly describe them as races of men, and flaunt with impunity their false and vainglorious discoveries.' (Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. by Marcus Dods (New York: Random House, 1950), pp. 531-532). Earlier in the same chapter he had declared that: 'whoever is anywhere born a man, (...) no matter what unusual appearance he presents in colour, movement, sound, nor how peculiar he is in some power, part, or quality of his nature, no Christian can doubt that he springs from that one protoplast.' (Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, p. 531).

of a new 'heterological paradigm'[20] and led to a redefinition of the essence of humanity itself. By the end of the Middle Ages humanity and animality were no longer considered – as the Church Fathers had maintained – the diverging poles of a neat opposition. In accordance with the general belief of the time, humanity did not consist in any distinctive 'essence' opposing humans to animals: rationality, self-consciousness, free will were not regarded as 'superior' qualities. To the eyes of medieval people, it became possible to cross the permeable threshold between humanity and animality. This meant that it was possible to find some people 'less human' than others. What brought them closer to bestiality? What in today's terms could be defined as their social conditions, as well as their specific cultural and ethnic features. Animal traits began to be attributed to people whose habits were not regarded as 'fully human'. As Salisbury pointed out, 'as the boundaries between humans and animals became increasingly blurred, marginalized groups seemed to slip between the human boundary'.[21] This process of 'bestialization' concerned primarily people living on the fringe of society: peasants, paupers, and ethnic minorities such as the 'Gypsies'.

As already pointed out, in the text of the *Cronica Bononiensis* the behaviour of the 'Gypsies' is depicted as bestial: 'they ate like pigs', we are told, and the expression is of remarkable significance, as eating habits are a defining feature of cultural identity. All practices concerning food – from production to consumption – are heavily invested with some cultural connotation; they frequently act as actual 'codes' that contribute to establish a sense of group belonging. Dietary rules and

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[20] See Chapter 5, note 28.

[21] See J. E. Salisbury, 'Human Beasts and Bestial Humans in the Middle Ages', in J. Ham and M. Senior (eds), *Animal acts: Configuring the Human in Western History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 9-21 (p. 15).

taboos, as showed by Mary Douglas with reference to Jewish culture, can thoroughly permeate human behaviour and may be conceived as the symbolic line of demarcation between specific ethnic groups.[22] Pigs were traditionally considered 'unclean' animals.[23] The fact of being compared with animals that were the object of ritual avoidance (as in Jewish and Muslim culture) and generally regarded with aversion and dislike, amounted to being placed at the lowest level of humankind, on the verge between wildness and civility.[24]

The 'textual bestialization' of 'Gypsies' examined here is emblematic of a common strategy of labelling minority groups as well as of the medieval conception of aesthetics. If we take a closer look at the ban, we notice that the bestialization is only a fragment of the overall depiction of 'Gypsies' as 'ugly'. As we will see, in medieval times ugliness was not merely an aesthetic quality. It was an integral part of the ontological structure of every being, and it was considered the external manifestation of interior qualities. The Greek conception of beauty was also characterized by a close connection between phenomenic reality and transcendental qualities: *kalos kai agathos* (beautiful and good), physical beauty was a clear sign of the soul's beauty.[25] On the other hand, physical deformity was a sign of evil. Beauty was thus assessed on the basis of a moral judgement, and virtue was considered to be a kind of 'perfection', internal as well as external. If 'Gypsies' were defined as 'the

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[22] See M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*.

[23] According to the Bible, it was allowed to eat 'every animal with cloven hooves, having the hoof split into two parts, *and that* chews the cud' (Deut 14. 6). In the Levitico we also read: 'These *are* the animals which you may eat among all the beasts there *are* on the earth: "Among the beasts, whatever divides the hoof, having cloven hooves *and* chewing the cud – that you may eat."' (Lev. 11. 2-3). Pigs were then included among the animals not suitable for consumption, as they were neither cloven-footed nor they 'chewed the cud'. They were therefore considered to be 'impure', 'abominable', according to biblical thought.

[24] For a discussion of the Roma's conviction of the 'unclean nature' of the Gağe and their pollution beliefs, see A. Sutherland, *Gypsies: The Hidden Americans* (London: Tavistock, 1975), J. Okely (1983), and M. Stewart, *Time of the 'Gypsies'* (Boulder and Oxford: Westview, 1997).

[25] This Greek expression (contracted to *kalos kagathos*) encapsulates the Greek ideal of beauty as closely related to goodness and moral perfection.

ugliest people ever seen', perhaps it was because they were subject to some generalized form of moral contempt. Their behaviour, as well as their appearance, must have made quite an impression on medieval society. In this context, the emphasis on their excessive emaciation (they are said to be *magri*, that is, skinny) could also be read in the light of the general belief in 'Gypsies'' 'evil nature'.

As far as the dark complexion is concerned ('Gypsies' are described as *negri*, black), its contribution to the portrayal of 'Gypsies' seems to be aimed at accentuating their supposed 'bestial' behaviour.[26] The position of the adjective within the text – besides the word 'pigs' – seems to suggest an overall impression of 'Gypsies' as 'unclean', dirty creatures closer to savage beasts than humans.[27] 'No washing ever withens the black Gypsy' – wrote the tenth-century Persian poet Firdawsi; they were 'ugly men, black, cooked by the sun', according to Sebastian Münster's *Cosmographia Universalis*, and they had the 'most ugly faces, black like those of Tartars', as the monk Cornerius of Lubeck reported.[28]

The widespread dislike surrounding black colour is not sufficient to account for

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[26] The above-mentioned association of 'black' with 'ugliness' leads us to some brief considerations about the general perception and reactions to colours. Humans use colour classification as a crucial form of exploration and intellectual systematization of the outer world. In this regard colour perception could be considered a fundamental cognitive device employed on a universal scale, a sort of 'language' whose basic terminology is somehow 'translatable' across cultures, as they enjoy a certain degree of mutual correspondence. What cannot be regarded as universal, nonetheless, are the symbolic connotations ascribed to this code by the members of distinct human groups, since they reflect the irreducible plurality of cultures. However, comparative studies in social perception of colour have shown that there is a widespread inclination among humans to react negatively to black (and, on the other hand, to react positively to white). This is not to say, simplistically, that the negative attitude towards black should automatically determine an emotional aversion towards dark-skinned people. In any case, it seems very plausible that the perception of the black/white polarity should be the object of some widely shared feelings. Carl Degler in his work on slavery and race relations quotes several examples of this form of 'communality of perceptions' among non-white Europeans. See Carl N. Degler, *Neither Black nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States* (New York, Macmillan: 1971), pp. 207-213.

[27] In opposition to this belief, the Roma tend to give a positive intepretation of their 'blackness' and consider the issue of 'colour' as closely related to their social marginalization, as I will show in Chapter 4.i.i.

[28] Quoted in D. Kenrick and G. Puxon, *The Destiny of Europe's 'Gypsies'* (London: Heinemann, 1972), p. 19.

the negative impression made by the 'black Gypsy' on the settled population. Once again, we need to refer to medieval anthropological thought and symbolism to better understand the reason why 'Gypsies'' dark pigmentation was likely to cause an unfavourable reaction. In the ancient Mediterranean world, as Frank Snowden points out, 'populations of dark pigmentations were nothing novel',[29] and although black was generally associated with death and ill omens, one cannot assert the actual existence of any anti-black feeling within the Greco-Roman world. If anything (as it is commonly found in mainly white societies), it was possible to detect a slight aesthetic preference of Greeks and Romans for white beauty over dark beauty, but in general they tended to value both kinds of beauty. Throughout the Middle Ages the general notion of 'beauty' and 'ugliness' was a highly intellectualized one, and the aesthetic sense of the epoch set particular emphasis on the metaphysical roots of beauty.[30] The beauty we admire in earthly things was thought to come from God, their creator, who is the First Good and is *supersubstantiale pulchrum* (beautiful beyond being, in itself), the Supreme Beauty. Beauty stems from the harmony and the sense of consonance through which things are created. From this point of view, in medieval thought beauty was chiefly an ontological, extremely rarefied principle. It was neither a tangible quality nor an objective attribute of things. This does not mean, however, that the Medievals were not concerned with other, less abstract aspects of beauty. In fact, they held a conception of formal, aesthetic beauty, that is, of *pulchritudo* as *formositas*,[31] which could be empirically experienced. According to this system, beauty arises from some sort of proportion, of harmonious accordance

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[29] Frank M. Snowden, *Before Color Prejudice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 67.

[30] See U. Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas* (London: Radius, 1988).

[31] *Form* in the sense of 'shape', an external feature.

of each part of a body with its whole. The chromatic manifestation of this *debita proportio* was *claritas*, clarity, and aesthetic enjoyment was associated with sensations of light and splendour coming from proportioned, ordered forms.[32] As we can see, there was a close association between 'proportion' and 'light': if beauty arose from proportion, light was considered as proportion *par excellence*. But what about the *absence* of light? What about blackness? In Christian iconography, the colour black was a sign of mourning and penitence and it was used to represent error, evil and carnal sin. In Dante's *Commedia* – generally considered a sort of 'summa' of medieval thought – darkness symbolizes a condition of ignorance and sin.[33] On the other hand, light represented the condition of Grace (*lumen Gratiae*, *Gratia illuminans*) and was the symbol of reason (the light of wisdom), of revelation and faith.

For the aims of the present analysis, we need to ask how this specific chromatic symbolism influenced the perception of the 'Gypsies' as different from the rest of the population. The colour of their skin marked them off (as a rather negative quality) from the others. It is not possible to ascertain the extent to which colour symbolism acted as a device of ethnic labelling, but even if 'there is no need to postulate a "consciousness of kind" to explain a person's awareness of others', it is undeniable that humans naturally tend to categorize other humans on the grounds of their

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[32] As Huizinga pointed out: 'Three things, says Saint Thomas, are required for beauty: first, integrity or perfection, because what is incomplete is ugly on that account; next, true proportion or consonance; lastly, brightness, because we call beautiful whatever has a brilliant colour'. (J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages: A Study of the Forms of Life, Thought, and Art in France and the Netherlands in the 14th and 15th Centuries* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 255).

[33] Dante finds himself within a '*selva oscura*', a dark wood (*Inferno* I, 2), the '*aura nera*', the dark air of Hell is 'malignant' (V, 86) and Hell itself is defined as an 'abysmal valley of pain' (IV, 8), 'so dark and deep' (IV, 10) that the pilgrim 'could not make out nothing there' (*non vi discernea alcuna cosa*, IV, 12). See D. Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. by T. Sinclair (London: The Bodley Head, 1958), pp. 22-23; 58-59; 76-77.

physical characteristics.[34] This is part of a common process of appraisal and organization of the outer world, a sort of 'cognitive precondition' to social action. In the case of 'Gypsies', their skin colour and their itinerancy were probably enough to determine their 'Otherness', their strangeness to the settled population, variously represented – in the historical records as well as within popular culture – as a sign of bestiality, a mark of infamy and so forth. In modern times, as we will see, these representations were due to become part of a powerful strategy of racial labelling and persecution.

Last but not least, we should acknowledge the mention of an alleged Egyptian origin of 'Gypsies' to which this text seems to refer.[35] The Middle Ages witnessed the diffusion of a wide range of legends (grouped together by scholars as representative of the so-called 'Egyptian connection')[36] which fostered the association of 'Gypsies' with the East, and especially Egypt.[37] It is impossible to ascertain the belief at the origin of this connection. What is certain is that the Egyptian title has been widely adopted over the centuries, giving rise to an extensive variety of stereotypical representations, from the trope of the pilgrim escaping pagan persecution to the mysterious legends surrounding 'Gypsy' occupations, perhaps originated from a common belief of the time, according to which Egypt was the cradle of the art of magic. The groups who claimed to come from 'Little Egypt' (a

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[34] G. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1958), p. 18. Quoted in C. N. Degler, *Neither Black nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States* (New York, Macmillan: 1971), p. 208.

[35] The very term 'Gypsy' is a shortening of the word 'Egyptian'. The belief in an Egyptian origin of the 'Gypsies' gave rise to a flourishing terminology, as testified by names such as *Egiftos* (used in Greece), *Evgit* (Albania), *Gypenaers* (Holland), etc.

[36] J. Okely, *The Traveller-Gypsies*, pp. 3-4.

[37] The 'Egyptian connection' here alluded to exerted a conspicuous influence on the pictorial representation of 'Gypsies' as exotic, Oriental subjects (cf. especially Italian painters Giorgione (*Gypsy and Soldier*, ante 1510), Titian (*La Zingarella*, c. 1510), Garofalo and Correggio's 'Gypsy' *Madonna* (*c.*1530)).

Greek region so-named because of its fertility) were subsequently identified as 'Egyptians' *tout court*.

The reference to Egypt is just one of the innumerable attempts to determine the country of origin of 'Gypsies'. As we will see, the 'knotty problem' of 'Gypsy' origins has been a constant worry for the scholars involved in the study of the 'Gypsies' history'. To be precise, it was typical of the scientific 'paradigm' of the time,[38] as Piasere put it, a sort of *conditio sine qua non* that could not have been overlooked but had to be thoroughly investigated.[39] The result of these historical reconstructions – often unsupported by any documentary evidence – was a striking plethora of fanciful theories which fostered an endless series of 'Gypsy legends'. Some of these stories will be the subject of the following pages.

(i.ii) The seed of Cain: vicissitudes of a cursed people

As with the Jewish diaspora, whose ultimate genesis lay beyond their comprehension, medieval people referred to a Biblical exegesis to justify the 'atypical' (in other words, antisocial) behaviour of the 'Gypsies'.

A considerable number of 'Gypsy legends' refer to the Bible to account for the origins of the 'Gypsies' and their wandering habits. According to these legends, the 'Gypsies' were the descendants of Cain,[40] condemned to wander on the earth due to

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[38] See the concept of 'paradigm' elaborated by T. Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

[39] See L. Piasere, 'De origine Cinganorum', *Études et documents balkaniques et méditerranéens*, 14 (1989), 105-126.

[40] Cain, the eldest son of Adam and Eve, was condemned by God to be a wanderer for the killing of his brother Abel. Unlike his brother, who was a shepherd, Cain cultivated the land, but since the ground he used to till became imbued with Abel's blood, he had to abandon it to embark on an erratic life to expiate his terrible crime: 'Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where *is* Abel your brother?" And he said, "I do not know. *Am* I my brother's keeper?" And he said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. *So now you are cursed from the earth, which*

the original curse put upon their fratricidal ancestor.[41]

In the Bible we read that God, in order to protect Cain, imposed a token on him, a 'sign' that everybody would have recognized, but the nature of this mark is not revealed. In all probability it was meant to be an emblem of the divine protection. At any rate, this token was destined to be widely interpreted as a mark of infamy throughout the centuries. The consequences of this curse were going to affect also the 'Gypsies', whose 'problematic' position within the settled society made them the ideal scapegoats for the most misleading beliefs.[42] The nomadic life of 'Gypsies' was probably to be included in the dimension of the *marvelous*, in the sense of a 'distortion of the normal, natural world' (Le Goff 1992: 40), and their deviancy from the customary norm could not be plausibly explained unless in religious terms.[43]

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has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. A fugitive and a vagabond you shall be on the earth."' (Genesis 4. 9-12; my emphasis). As a consequence of this curse, Cain was turned away from God's protecting wing: 'And Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment *is* greater than I can bear! Surely you have driven me out this day from the face of the ground; I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond on the earth, and it will happen *that anyone who finds me will kill me*."' (Genesis 4. 13-14; my emphasis). The interpretation of this passage taken out of its original context led to a conclusion full of dreadful consequences for 'Gypsies': the condition of the fugitive in itself began to be considered a sufficient cause for slaughter and persecution.

[41] In contrast with the Gağe's interpretations of the 'cursed Gypsy', see the Roma's re-reading of this 'curse' as the result of social exclusion (Chapter 4.i.i).

[42] The general acceptance gained by such a distorted interpretation is not surprising, if looked at in the light of medieval cognitive patterns. Medieval imagination, as the scholars of the Middle Ages have shown, relied heavily on biblical citations to interpret earthly world. The principle of *auctoritas* governed all the disciplines and the way knowledge was achieved and organised according to conventional categories sanctioned by the tradition. As a result, the acquisition of a historical perspective was altered by a systematic reference to the paradigmatic, 'timeless present of eternal truths' of the Bible: 'The true comprehension of facts was [...] obscured by the symbolical interpretation placed upon them by another trend of thought'. (Le Goff, Jacques, *History and Memory*, trans. by Steven Rendall and Elizabeth Claman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 79). The canon of any interpretation, as we have seen, was the biblical quotation, whose decontextualized and uncritical use gave rise to innumerable myths and legends endowed with remarkable persistence.

[43] As Bloch emphasized, 'in the eyes of all who were capable of reflection the material world was scarcely more than a sort of mask, behind which took place all the really important things; it seemed to them also a language, intended to express by signs a more profound reality. Since a tissue of appearances can offer but little interest in itself, the result of this view was that observation was generally neglected in favour of interpretation.' (Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society. The Growth of Ties of Dependence*, trans. by L.A.Manyon, 2nd edn (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962, vol. 1), p. 83).

'Gypsies' were also thought to be the descendants of Cush, son of Ham (spelled 'Cham' in medieval time), one of the three sons of Noah, cursed by his father,[44] and they had to suffer the same curse: because of the terrible sin that they had inherited, they deserved to be treated as slaves.[45] There are also legends according to which the 'Gypsies' had been punished for not giving shelter to the Holy Family on their flight from Egypt and for suggesting to Judas the betrayal of Christ. Finally, 'Gypsies' have been associated with the massacre of the children of Bethlehem, and (together with Jewish people) they have been accused of forging the nails of the Cross.[46]

Despite its lack of foundation, the belief that a divine curse lay on 'Gypsy' people, and that, in consequence of this, they were condemned to fatally wander from place to place was uncritically accepted and held undisputed credibility throughout the Middle Ages. Myth and history became so inextricably interwoven that the tales of the 'cursed Gypsies', generated from a fictitious portrayal, were destined to overshadow the real thing. Gradually but inexorably, all these legends helped thicken the shadow of mystery surrounding the 'Gypsies'. The 'Gypsies', on the other hand, ended up impersonating and promoting some of these myths, which on some occasions had a large influence on their oral tradition and shaped the composite body of 'Gypsy' folklore. The reason for their 'conniving' attitude is not a mystery.

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[44] According to Genesis, after the deluge Noah cultivated the vine. One day, intoxicated by the wine whose strength he still ignored, he lay down naked in his tent. Ham discovered him and called his brothers Shem and Japheth to look at him, but they covered their father's nakedness, walking backwards so that they would not see him. But when Noah 'awoke from his wine, [he] knew what his younger son had done to him. Then he said: "Cursed *be* Canaan; a servant of servant he shall be to his brethren."' (Gen ix, 24-25). The curse (which in the text is pronounced against Ham in the person of Canaan, his youngest son) has been the subject of various interpretations, some of which refer to the perversity of Cham, whose bad fame was to fall on Canaan's offspring (in ancient time considered as immoderately lascivious).

[45] A belief widely exploited as a theoretical justification of slavery.

[46] The version of this tale, as testified by the oral tradition, has been inverted by the Gypsies, who claim that in reality they had removed one of the nails from the Cross and for this reason they were allowed to steal with impunity.

The exploitation of these popular myths does not merely show 'the wish of a people without ties not to be without roots', as Clébert put it;[47] the innumerable and fanciful stories concerning the 'Gypsy' diaspora, far from being only subsidiary artefacts aimed at feeding the 'Gypsy enigma', acted on many occasions as an actual strategy of ethnic survival, as a 'great trick'.[48] By assuming the identity of pilgrims or refugees forced to leave their homeland to flee pagan persecution, 'Gypsies' devised a useful strategy aimed at justifying their transit and their presence within the sedentary society. As already pointed out, during the Middle Ages not only migrations of vagabonds, beggars and paupers were fairly common, but the general attitude toward penitents was a favourable one, as it was functional to the belief system of the period. However, as the European religious climate began to change (as testified by the advent of the Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation), the privileged condition of the pilgrim began to lose its favourable aura.[49] The overwhelming variety of tales and legends surrounding the 'Gypsies' from the very start may help us to throw some light upon the reasons for this rapid decline of the image of the 'Gypsy' as a penitent. Once more, it is important to remark that in medieval times the condition of a people living far from their place of origin was perceived as anomalous. The condition of the exile (from the expression

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[47] See J. P. Clébert, *The Gypsies*, trans. by Charles Duff (London: Vista Books, 1963), p. 5.

[48] 'In the Romani of the 'Gypsies' of Spain, the expression *o xonxanó baró*, "the great trick", refers to a certain method of relieving some gullible dupe of a large sum of money. In the entire chronicle of 'Gypsy' history, the greatest trick of all was the one played on western Europe in the early fifteenth century'. Quoted in A. Fraser, *The Gypsies*, p. 62.

[49] Despite its declining popularity, the reference to pilgrimage enabled 'Gypsies' to enjoy a period of relatively harmonic coexistence with the settled population, as they were no longer perceived as bands of drifters, but as organized groups following a definite itinerary and led by prestigious leaders. Perhaps also 'Gypsies'' occupations contributed to a certain extent to this harmonic coexistence. Some of the occupations on which 'Gypsies' relied to sustain themselves during their migrations were undoubtedly functional to the economic features of medieval society. There were 'Gypsy' families renowned as refined craftsmen – especially as blacksmiths – who were frequently required (for services that in fact suffered from a shortage of labour force) and even protected by the aristocracy and the local authorities, as happened in Spain, England and southern Italy. According to the pattern

extra solum) was seen with suspicion, and the belief in a curse was quite a plausible explanation for the existence of marginal groups and outsiders. But 'Gypsies' were not merely a band of vagrants. Their marginality, further increased by their alleged mysterious vicissitudes and occupations, was not just a matter of social marginality: it was deeply rooted in their cultural specificity. For this reason their Otherness, initially greeted with wonder and curiosity, was soon to be perceived as a potential threat to the social order. Correspondingly, the reaction of the host societies gradually shifted from a theoretical plane to a practical one: it is at this stage that the mythical beliefs about 'Gypsies' were used to support their persecution.

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of their activities, some groups tended towards a situation of semi-sedentarism from the very beginning, while other groups pursued different paths and occupational strategies.

(ii) The banned 'Gypsy'

13 APRIL 1493

[...] Tuti gli zingani quali si trovano de presente in questa parte debiano subito partirse et per lo advenire non ardischano più ritornare tra Po et Adda sotto pena dela forca.

(From and edict issued under the rule of Ludovico il Moro)[50]

24 AUGUST 1570

Oltre l'altre previsioni fatte intorno a Cingari, quali per esser *gente scandalosa* non intende per modo alcuni pratichino in questa Provincia di Frignano, per questa sua nuova determinazione ordina, comanda, et bandisce sotto pena della Galera tutti li Cingari grandi et piccoli, che si troveranno essere, o nello avvenire verranno nel Frignano, concedendo et comandando a ciascuno, che possi senza pena fargli prigioni, svaligiarli et darli nelle mani alla ragione.

(From and edict issued in the Duchy of Modena)[51]

11 JULY 1675

Essendo tra tutti li forastieri i Cingari la più perniciosa gente, che venghi nello Stato, comanda S. E. a tutti li Cingari d'ogni sesso [...] che fra tre giorni, dopo la pubblicazione della presente, prossimi seguenti, debbano essere partiti affatto da ogni Città, Terra e luogo sottoposti a questo Gouerno, sotto pena agli huomini della galera per anni cinque, et della pubblica frusta alle donne.

(From an edict issued in Milan by the Prince of Ligne)[52]

1572

Il territorio parmigiano sentì anch'esso grave molestia dai *pubblici ladroni*, i quali, *zingari di nazione*, al numero di 300 s'erano ridotti con quella segretezza che poterono maggiore in una casa da loro comperata in quel territorio, d'onde poi scorrevano in diversi luoghi, e, commettendo furti e latrocinii, danneggiavano il paese in modo che nuina cosa pareva più sicura non solo ai viandanti, ma anche ai propri abitatori di quel ducato. Avutasi finalmente la vera informazione e *conosciuto d'onde cagionava tutto il male*, furono mandate dal duca molte genti a piedi ed a cavallo per opprimere quei *malvagi*, che avendoli circondati in casa li fecero morire tutti.

Campana[53]

The aura of uncertainty surrounding the first arrival of the 'Gypsies' in the Italian peninsula seems to apply to the whole 'Gypsy' presence in fifteenth century-Italy. It was a time of great political instability during which the regional states constituted a myriad of small political entities (such as 'duchies' and 'republics') where every state followed its rulers' example. The peninsula was ravaged – almost since the end

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[50] Quoted in A. Arlati, 'Gli Zingari nello Stato di Milano', *Lacio Drom*, 2 (1989) 4-11 (p. 4).

[51] Quoted in A. G. Spinelli, 'Gli Zingari nel Modenese', *Lacio Drom*, 5 (1978), 25-55 (p. 35); my emphasis.

[52] Quoted in A. Colocci, *Gli Zingari* (Turin: Loescher, 1889), p. 88.

[53] *Delle historie del mondo* (Venice, 1607), p. 139; my emphasis.

of the fourteenth century – by harsh struggles for hegemony opposing the states of Milan, Venice, Florence and the Papal States. In addition, between the late 1400s and the mid-1500s, Italy became the scene of bloody conflict between the major powers of Europe. While at the very culmination of her cultural thriving, Italy experienced the loss of freedom and the harshness of foreign domination (from the French invasion to the Sack of Rome in 1527). In this context the need for order and the reinforcement of political authority (that is, the necessary requisites for the formation of a unitary nation-state) became an absolute priority. Needless to say, the political and legal fragmentation of the Italian states did not prevent them from finding a common policy of rejection and persecution against 'Gypsies'. Besides, the advent of the Reform and the Catholic Counter-Reform did not fail to exert a large influence over the attitude towards 'Gypsies'.[54]

The Catholic Church was particularly active in the persecution of those whose conduct did not conform to their religious canons, and the 'Gypsy' way of life was a constant source of preoccupation for the clergy. The Council of Trent (1563) did not

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[54] In 1565 all 'Gypsies' unwilling to abandon nomadism, take up 'honest trade', and adopt 'good Christian conduct', were banished from the Diocese of Milan. In 1617, at the Synod of Sala (Naples), it was decided that 'Gypsy' women practising 'magic arts' should be incarcerated. At the Synod of Nonantola (Modena) in 1688, priests were required to immediately expel from their parishes any 'Gypsies' who were not 'good Christians'; the rest were not allowed to remain more than three days, and religious burial was refused if it was suspected that the deceased had not been baptised. In 1692 at the Synod of Montefiascone (Rome) 'Gypsies' were forbidden to travel across the diocese without special permission from the Bishop. We can see that, even on the rare occasions that 'Gypsies' were tolerated by temporal powers, they were rejected by the spiritual ones: thus, at the Synod of Capaccio (Naples) in 1629, the fact that 'Gypsies' were wandering everywhere with the permission of princes was highlighted, and the Bishop forbade them to exercise 'magic arts' on pain of incarceration and other penalities (such as flogging). See M. Zuccon, 'La legislazione degli Zingari negli Stati italiani prima della Rivoluzione', *Lacio Drom*, 1-2 (1979), 1-68 (pp. 55-58).

In the *Duchy of Milan* Martino, 'Count of Little Egypt' obtains a safe-conduct from the Duke of Milan, Gian Galeazzo II, in 1480. As we approach the end of the fifteenth centuries, however, official documents show quite a different attitude towards the 'Gypsies': two edicts issued in 1493 enjoined the 'Gypsies' to leave the territory of the Duchy on pain of hanging, and in 1506, under the French rule (which brought about an exacerbation of persecutions), they were banned from Milan under suspicion of carrying the plague. Similar decrees were issued in 1517, 1523 and in 1534, all testifying the rise of a persecutory trend that was destined to extend (itself) inexorably to the other Italian states (A. Arlati, 'Gli Zingari nello Stato di Milano'). In *Piedmont* some *Saraceni sive Cingari* are given

mention explicitly the 'Gypsies', but enjoined '*vagi matrimonii caute jungendi*', that is, people '*qui vagantur incertas habent sedes*' were not allowed to get married without special permission from their bishops.[55] 'Gypsies' were obviously included within the category of the '*vagi*'[56] affected by this regulation: in 1687, at the Synod held in S. Marco Argentano's Diocese[57] it was declared that '*Aegjptiaci, seu Zingari, et qui nullibi certas sedes habent, eisque statum liberum ostendere difficile foret, non possint matrimonium contrahere nisi de licentia Congregationis Santi officii*'.[58] The itinerant habits of *Cingari*, *Aegyptiaci*, *Saraceni* or *Abissini* were thus not in line with the rigid discipline imposed by the Council, and, what was more, their religious practices lingered on the verge of orthodoxy. 'Gypsies'' occupations, in particular, were under accusation.

As amply illustrated by Jacques Le Goff, in the medieval West there was a hierarchical classification of professions, characterized by a rigid bipartition between the 'licit' and the 'illicit'. What was the distinguishing criterion underlying this bipartition? At that time, the social acceptability of an occupation was related to the rural structure of Western European society. On the one hand, occupations connected with the cultivation of the land were considered 'opportune', appropriate and blessed by God. On the other hand, 'Gypsies'' occupations, such as forging, entertaining and fortune telling were included among the so-called *negotia illicita*,

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payments to leave the territory around Turin (1494-9) (M. Pastore, 'Zingari nello Stato Sabaudo', *Lacio Drom*, 3-4 (1989), 6-19).

[55] M. Zuccon, 'La legislazione degli Zingari negli Stati italiani prima della Rivoluzione', p. 56.

[56] As early as the thirteenth century, 'Berthold of Regensberg rejected only the rabble of vagabonds and vagrants, the *vagi*, from Christian society. They made up the *familia diaboli*, the devil's family, in contrast to all other trades or "estates" henceforth admitted into Christ's family, the *familia Christi*' (J. Le Goff, *Time, Work and Culture in the Middle Ages*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 62-63).

[57] After the Council, it was the cardinals and bishops who, through diocesan synods from North to South of the peninsula, dictated how the clergy were to conduct themselves with *Cingari*, *Aegyptiaci*, *Saraceni* or *Abissini*.

[58] M. Zuccon, 'La legislazione degli Zingari negli Stati italiani prima della Rivoluzione', p. 56.

such as those of the innkeeper, the butcher, the minstrel, the magician-sorcerer, the alchemist, the physician, the surgeon, the prostitute. The general contempt for the activities of the 'Gypsies' was frequently aggravated by a specific form of religious condemnation extended to all trades which involved committing one of the deadly sins:

> Lust, [...] was the basis for condemnation of innkeepers and bathkeepers, whose premises were frequently notorious, as well as jongleurs, [...] tavern keepers; [...] avarice, or greed, was in a sense the professional sin of both merchants and men of the law – lawyers, notaries, judges. The condemnation of gluttony naturally led to the condemnation of cooks. Pride and avarice no doubt added to the condemnation of soldiers. Even sloth could be used to justify the presence on the index of the beggar's profession.[59]

The itinerant way of life of the 'Gypsies' was considered a typical manifestation of their idleness and their reluctance to conform to the rules. If in medieval time idleness was strongly disapproved of, as it was considered to be a sign of moral degradation, during the sixteenth century it was condemned by both Catholic and Protestant ideology, according to which it had to be eradicated.

The favourable attitude towards the cultivation of the land was naturally combined with the predilection for a sedentary pattern of settlement, which the 'Gypsies' patently contravened. Again, their itinerancy, together with their 'unfathomable' origins conspired against them. The fact of leading a nomadic way of life 'was in itself sufficient grounds for punishment, and those guilty of it had the worst to fear even if they had done nothing wrong, since, in the eyes of those around them, they embodied subversion and perversion. 'I have no evidence of criminal acts committed by these people, but their situation is such that they must of necessity be tempted to commit them if the occasion presents itself... they cannot but be

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[59] J. Le Goff, *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages*, pp. 59-60.

dangerous', wrote a Strasbourg magistrate at the beginning of the 19th century.[60] That is how 'Gypsies', after falling into disgrace as pilgrims, were downgraded to the rank of vagrants, people with no fixed abode and no honest occupation.

Cerretani, 'Charlatans', that is how 'Gypsies' were named: tricksters, masters in the art of deceit, always ready to take advantage of the credulity and simple-mindness of the herd.[61] Quite evidently, the unconventional features of their 'unproductive' and dishonest activities were considered by the authorities (the religious as well as the secular ones) a sufficient cause for their denigration or even their extermination. Besides being denied any social recognition, 'Gypsy' occupations were heavily burdened with negative symbolic connotations, stemming from inveterate patterns of contamination beliefs that laid the basis for their demonization and persecution.

Not only were 'Gypsies' surrounded by a plethora of sinister, infamous legends according to which they were the descendants of Cain or Cam. They were also depicted as mysterious creatures related to the underground world. They were thought to be sons of subterranean divinities (especially Mercury and Vulcan), or even demons coming from hell. In this respect, the dark colour of their skin was considered a clear confirmation of their nature of infernal creatures. By virtue of this connection with demonic entities, they were thought to be able to foretell the future and to have the power to cast spells and curses. In short, they were accused of black (harmful) magic.[62]

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[60] Quoted in J. P. Liégeois, *Roma, Gypsies, Travellers*, (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1994), p. 131.

[61] See P. Camporesi (ed.), *Il libro dei vagabondi: Lo Speculum cerretanorum di Teseo Pini, Il vagabondo di Rafaele Frianoro e altri testi di furfanteria. A cura di Piero Camporesi* (Turin: Einaudi, 1973).

[62] It would be difficult to understate the gravity of these beliefs, especially if we consider that this period was characterized by what some authors call a 'witch psychosis'. The reformist trend characterizing Western Christendom almost since the Council of Constance (1414-18) was reinforced during the second and the third quarter of the fifteenth century. Many factors had contributed to this

After the Council of Trent the provisions against 'Gypsies' included them among the multitude of magicians, fortune-tellers, diviners, that is, individuals whose activities were likely to promote superstition and false beliefs among the population. They were aimed against the 'magic arts' practised especially by 'Gypsy' women. Divination through palmistry (chiromancy) and tarot cards, astrology, hydromancy and sorcery are practices mentioned in the proceedings of the Synods of Milan (1565), Messina (1589), Palermo (1586), Salerno (1596), Amalfi (1597) and Siracusa (1651). The general impression is that the Church, at that time particularly concerned about the restoration of the unity of the Catholic Church and the orthodoxy of its faith, considered the ambiguous status of 'Gypsies' as potentially disruptive for the system which they were trying to reaffirm. From this moment on, they were no longer regarded as piteous pilgrims but as cunning characters in connection with the devil and capable of *maleficia* (sorcery), that is, evil deeds, actions aimed at harming people through the exploitation of supernatural powers.[63]

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recrudescence, although none of them can be considered a direct cause of this phenomenon. Among these factors Richard Kieckhefer mentions 'the widespread adoption of inquisitorial procedure', an 'unrestricted use of torture', the 'development of the witch stereotype', and the 'suspicion that apparently innocent magic might turn out to be demonic' (Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p.199). In Italy this phenomenon reached its maximum intensity during the 1520s, although it should be emphasized that usually 'Gypsies' were not the primary target of the Inquisition (Fraser 1992, 184). In Italy (especially in the South) 'Gypsies' suffered persecution mainly during the seventeenth century.

[63] In some respects, the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance were deeply permeated by magic, as testified by the great number of works on the subject, from bestiaries, herbals, lapidaries to treatises on the sympathies and antipathies – relationships of compatibility and incompatibility – among creatures. In that period magic practices were widely employed: divination, enchantment (magic use of words), ligatures, medical magic, occult sciences, necromancy were not a novelty to the people of the time. This large variety of magic practices implied a large number of practitioners (whose skills varied greatly as well), such as monks, physicians, folk healers and diviners, which gives us the impression that a magic tinge somehow permeated a great part of European folklore. Broadly speaking, there were roughly two known forms of magic: natural and demonic. Natural magic (*magia naturalis*) relied on forces and elements present in nature to achieve its scopes. It may be considered the natural science of the time, concerned with the study of the multiple properties (or 'virtues') of things. Demonic magic involved the invocation of the *daimones* (demons, Latin *daemones*), that is, spirits whose condition was intermediate between men and gods. While pagans considered demons as neutral spirits, 'capable of serving either good or evil purposes', for Christians they were 'angels who had turned against their creator and turned wholly to evil'. (R. Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, p. 38). No matter whether magic was performed with evil (black magic) or good intention (white magic), in late medieval and Renaissance Europe people were highly suspicious towards magic in

'Gypsies'' occupations were particularly likely to attract witchcraft allegations. As already pointed out, 'Gypsies' were thought to come from Egypt, the cradle of astrology.[64] From their first appearance in Western Europe, they are described as practising various forms of divination: oneiromancy, palmistry, tarot reading. Forging was also considered as an activity that lingered perilously on the fringes of the occult sciences. As well as the alchemists, 'Gypsy' blacksmiths and coppersmiths were thought to be able to exert a mysterious power on matter, since they manipulated the elements to forge a new material. Such occupations were generally perceived as implying the invocation to diabolic entities and the use of magical forces. In addition, it should be noticed that members of guilds of craftsmen were often surrounded with a veil of mystery, like esoteric sects using a code of cryptic symbols and a specific jargon to protect their secret knowledge. At that time, mysterious learning and use of occult powers were unmistakably interpreted as signs of demonic magic.

These beliefs, combined with the 'exotic' features of 'Gypsy' people, contributed to shape the portrayal of 'Gypsies' as devilish creatures. They soon were accused of sorcery, necromancy, anthropophagy; their language was equated with a jargon. But what reality lay behind these accusations? Some brief considerations of the general features of European witchcraft may help us to understand the reason why 'Gypsies' have been associated with wizards, witches and diviners and regarded as 'instruments of the devil'.

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itself. But while the uneducated were less inclined to demonize magic, and considered it mostly natural, intellectuals were in general more suspicious, more prone to see a demonic component in magic. Divination, for example, 'was considered possible only with the aid of demons' (see Augustine, Marsilio Ficino and earlier theories by Plato and Cicero). This negative attitude, fostered by the zeal of the reformists, resulted in a persecutory tendency whose excesses are sadly notorious.

[64] Well into the eighteenth century, this belief was still given credence: Voltaire identified 'Gypsies' as the descendants of ancient priests and priestesses of Isis.

The phenomenon of witchcraft is currently a matter of fierce debate. The very existence of witches has been called into question, and many tend to read the whole issue of witchcraft as a form of 'collective psychosis' with tragic consequences. Yet if one focuses attention on the victims of witchcraft beliefs and on their emotional impact on people, the relevance of this phenomenon turns out to be indisputable. The implausibility of the crimes and misdeeds of which people were accused, as well as the unreliability of the confessions extorted at witch trials should not overshadow their function as actual strategies of social control. On the one hand, religious authorities perceived the presence of 'Gypsies' as a challenge to their role as bulwark of the authentic faith. On the other hand, political powers regarded their way of life as a deviation from the rules of the rising modern state. In any case, the condition of 'Gypsies' and of other marginals was an obstacle to the existing patterns of authority, and had to be controlled.

According to Mary Douglas,

> the witch doctrine is used as the idiom of control, since it pins blame for misfortune on trouble-makers and deviants. The accusation is a righteous demand for conformity. In a community in which overt conflict cannot be contained, witchcraft fears are used to justify expulsion and fissions.[65]

The integration of the rebellious 'Gypsies' into the framework of the modern State became the aim to be fulfilled at all costs. To this end, during the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries accusations of witchcraft and demonic magic acted as techniques of social labelling, as pointers of 'danger', as well as strategies of validation of extremely coercive measures.

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[65] M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 139.

(iii) From rejection to inclusion: Europe's 'ignoble' savages

The severe policy of exclusion of the 'Gypsies' pursued by the European states during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries proved inadequate and ineffective. Banishment and indiscriminate violence did not achieve the desired effect: the presence of the 'Gypsies', extravagant, conspicuous and troublesome, had not dissolved at all. Firstly, it had not dissolved because that policy was not feasible in practice: banishment gained nothing but forced 'Gypsies' to move from one country to another, giving rise to a revival of anti-'Gypsy' legislation and ultimately condemning them to embark on a circular, hopeless journey. On the other hand, the enduring presence of 'Gypsies' seems to suggest that the harsh anti-'Gypsy' measures were not fully put into practice. In this regard, scholars emphasize that on some occasions 'Gypsies' enjoyed the protection of the aristocracy:

> By contrast with the general antipathy the Romanies have often been held in esteem by the nobility. They provided a lively diversion and neither competed with, or menaced, the world of the aristocrats. It early became the habit of rich gentry to invite Romani entertainers with their music and dancing into their homes. Landowners protected them from the harsh laws. Many remained in refuge on nobles' estates. A special decree was issued in France in 1682 by which any aristocrat sheltering 'Gypsies' would forfeit his lands to the crown.[66]

As showed by Zuccon, political authorities adopted a contradictory policy toward 'Gypsies': 'nonostante l'antipatia, la diffidenza reciproca, i rancori da parte della popolazione civile per i danni che in effetti erano arrecati dagli Zingari, spesso i decreti sovrani erano violati non si sa se per sentimenti di umanità o per qualche altro motivo'.[67] A great number of decrees are nothing but the reinforcement of earlier

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[66] D. Kenrick and G. Puxon, 'Gypsies' *under the Swastika* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 1995), p. 15.

[67] 'Despite the antipathy, the mutual mistrust and the rancour of the local population due to the damages actually caused by the 'Gypsies', the royal decrees were often infringed, it is not certain whether for humanitarian feelings or for some other reasons'. M. Zuccon, 'La legislazione sugli Zingari negli Stati italiani prima della Rivoluzione', pp. 17-18; my translation.

orders and edicts, and reflect the constant violation of the newly-promulgated regulations. What seems to emerge here is a patent incongruity between the official portrayal of 'Gypsies' as outlaws and their actual relationship with the settled population. The services offered by 'Gypsies' as craftsmen, traders, seasonal workers and entertainers were actually functional to a pre-industrial economy. 'It has even come to pass', as Liégeois further points out, 'that well-established and highly qualified craftsmen, such as blacksmiths, were defended by a population in need of their services, and by the local authorities, in defiance of royal expulsion orders'.[68] The extreme flexibility of 'Gypsies'' patterns of settlement and employment appears to be in striking contrast with the repetitive, fossilized policy of the governments. Once the authorities had realized the ineffectiveness of their banishing methods, it became increasingly clear that a change in their approach was necessary. As Liégeois has opportunely stated,

> Exclusion as a form of negation, when practised by the public authorities, is neither practical (if neighbouring countries are doing it too, where are the banished to go?) nor economical (chasing people takes time and resources, and recidivism is the rule since escape is impossible). Moreover, banishment deprives the State of manpower. For all of these reasons, negation tends to shift from a policy of exclusion to one of containment, i.e. the compulsory, generally violent integration of 'Gypsies' into surrounding society.[69]

Louis XIV's and Maria Theresa of Austria's policies towards 'Gypsies' are eloquent examples of this kind of policy-making. In 1682 Louis XIV – whose domestic and foreign policy burdened his subjects with onerous fiscal impositions as well as implying the maintenance of a high level of social control – issued a decree according to which 'Gypsies' were required to apply themselves to 'useful' occupations, such as the cultivation of the land.

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[68] Liégeois, *Roma, Gypsies, Travellers*, p. 23.
[69] Liégeois, *Roma, Gypsies, Travellers*, pp. 136-137.

Perhaps the most notorious attempt to assimilate the 'Gypsies' is that of Empress Maria Theresa of Austria who, after an ineffective policy of exclusion of the 'Gypsies' from the country, issued several edicts aimed at 'rehabilitating' these recalcitrant, uncooperative subjects. Under her rule 'Gypsies' were forbidden to use their name *Cigáni*, and they had to adopt instead denominations such as of *Új Magyár* ('new Hungarians'), 'new citizens' or *Neubauern* ('new farmers'). Their nomadic life was to cease at once, and 'Gypsies' were required to 'sell their horses and vehicles', to live in 'proper' houses and to become good farmers. Their traditional occupations had to disappear. As far as their 'jargon' was concerned, it was to be abandoned, as well as their traditional clothes and food habits: in short, they were forbidden to be themselves. Along the same line, the policy adopted by the Emperor Joseph II, successor to Maria Theresa and co-regent since 1765, was aimed at the 'betterment' of the 'Gypsies'. In 1783 he issued an edict that remained in force until 1790, the year of his death, which imposed on them the following restrictions:

> No changing of names; houses to be numbered; monthly reports on way of life; nomadism forbidden; settled Gypsies allowed to visit fairs only in cases of special need; smithery banned except when certified as necessary by the authorities; numbers of musicians restricted; begging prohibited; Gypsies not to be settlers in their own right, but to be put into the service of others; Gypsy children, from the age of four upwards, to be distributed at least every two years among the neighbouring districts.[70]

As a consequence of this policy, many 'Gypsies' were forced to abandon their nomadic way of life and to cultivate the land. Many others decided to leave the country in order to avoid the effects of this strategy of ethnic cleansing.

In 1788 Charles III, following Joseph II's example, forbade 'Gypsies' to use their name, which had to be changed into that of 'new Magyars' or 'new Castilians'.

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[70] Fraser, *The Gypsies*, p. 159.

'Gypsies' were also forbidden to talk the Romani language, to practise their traditional occupations and to marry other 'Gypsies'.

Despite the lack of historical data confirming the factual enforcement of these laws within the Italian territories subjected to foreign rule, the legislation against 'Gypsies' seems to recall the general trend adopted by the other European states.[71] In fact, in many respects Italy was in the vanguard in the use of a policy of ethnic assimilation, as testified by the *Editto sopra la reduttione de Zingari et Zingare al ben vivere*, a ban issued in the Pontifical State in 1631 by Cardinal Barberini.[72]

Such a radical pattern of assimilation had serious consequences on the perception of 'Gypsy' culture, as Liégeois promptly highlighted: 'while simple rejection policies never need to confront the question of the existence or non-existence of Traveller culture, containment – a brutal first step of first stage towards assimilation – actively opposed the notion of 'Gypsies' and Traveller culture'.[73] The focus gradually shifted from the cultural features of the 'Gypsies' (variously perceived as 'exotic', mysterious or even devilish) to their alleged 'asociality' and the necessity to re-educate them and to take them back to a civilized condition. As already pointed out, the very existence of 'Gypsies' was regarded as an inadmissible challenge to the authority of the State, and they were increasingly considered a problem of 'public order', rather than a specific ethnic group.

The first target of this policy of negation became 'Gypsy' nomadism. Having reduced 'Gypsies' to mere associations of marginals with no fixed abode, the public authorities automatically equated the suppression of nomadism with the eradication

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[71] See A. Campigotto, 'I bandi bolognesi contro gli Zingari (sec. XVI-XVIII)', *Lacio Drom*, 4 (1987), 2-27.

[72] See M. Zuccon, 'La legislazione sugli Zingari negli Stati italiani prima della Rivoluzione', p. 48.

[73] Liégeois, *Roma, Gypsies, Travellers*, p. 146.

of the 'Gypsy problem'. Once more, 'Gypsies'' patterns of settlement turned out to be incompatible with Western patterns. If during the Middle Ages the connection with the land was considered the inescapable condition determining the social acceptability of a man's occupation, during the following centuries territoriality was the pillar of the absolute state. As such, the territory of the State had to be clearly delimited and protected from any unauthorized crossing. Another crucial aspect of the modern State concerns the pursuit of a bureaucratic centralization and the exertion of an increasingly strict monitoring of public life and welfare. 'Gypsies'' way of life and occupations inevitably clashed with this systematizing process, determining their inclusion in the category of the 'dangerous classes'. The 'Gypsies' were perceived as 'dangerous' due to their 'refusal' to be incorporated into a rational administrative system. What appears to be at work here is a crucial change in the attitude towards 'Gypsies' observed in the previous centuries. The 'Gypsy scare' was no longer nourished by irrational beliefs in their cursed or devilish nature nor addressed in religious terms, but was now read from a more 'secularized' perspective, that of the rulers of a rational, centralized state. 'Gypsies' had to be converted to a civilized life through a disciplined process of scholarization, productive work and ordered sedentarization. In order to reach the status of respectable subjects of the State, they had to leave behind all the 'aberrant' features that had hitherto interfered with their full emancipation. Heavy, manual work, in particular, was considered a form of education which could instil a sense of rigour and discipline even in the spirits of the least obedient.

In the eyes of some intellectuals of the time, the policy of the enlightened sovereigns was a remarkable achievement of Western civilization, a lesson of civility when compared with the terrible persecutions pursued against 'Gypsies' by the

Christian Church. Unfortunately the rational spirit of the century did not prevent the barbaric execution in Hungary of hundreds of 'Gypsies' accused of being cannibals. It was the year 1782.

> Almost two hundreds 'Gypsies' were arrested and charged with this crime and systematically tortured until they confessed. As a result the following sentences were carried out at the town of Frauenmark, Kamesa and Esabrag: 18 women were beheaded, 15 men hanged, 6 men broken on the wheel and 2 men quartered. A further 150 'Gypsies' were in prison still waiting their turn to die when the Emperor sent a commission to investigate the case and discovered that the confessions were false. The persons they had allegedly eaten were still alive.[74]

The 'asocial', inexplicable behaviour of the 'Gypsies' has been generally interpreted by the champions of the 'Enlightened dispotism' as a form of irrational rebellion against the state system. However, this interpretation was not unanimously accepted. With the emergence of a form of ethnographic investigation,[75] new theories began to be invoked to account for the 'Gypsy diversity'. Early ethnographers regarded 'Gypsies', as well as other 'exotic' cultures, as a separate 'race' of Oriental origins endowed with specific anthropological features deserving to be studied from a scientific, objective point of view. 'Gypsies'' stubborn reluctance to embrace civilization, they maintained, had its roots in the specific nature of these people.[76] Such a perception of 'Gypsies'' cultural specificity could be considered as part of a widespread phenomenon that played a remarkable role within the history of Western European thought.

As the detailed accounts of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century travellers and explorers describing the different, unusual customs of savage peoples began to be

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[74] Kenrick and Puxon, *The Destiny of Europe's Gypsies*, p. 33.

[75] 1799 is the year of the foundation of the *Société des Observateurs de l'homme*.

[76] There are striking similarities between the stereotypes attached to the 'Gypsies' and those discussed by Said in his *Orientalism*. I refer in particular to the representation of the Orientals as 'treacherous', 'lazy' and 'barbaric', as well as the belief in their 'aberrant' and 'lascivious' nature.

widely known, Europeans gradually learnt to acknowledge the cultural diversity of human groups. Philosophers and thinkers of the time theorized about the birth of Western civilization and its possible causes. The belief in a deterministic correlation between environmental and cultural factors began to take shape and exerted a remarkable influence on the rising anthropological science. Baron de Montesquieu, in his seminal work *De l'esprit des lois* (1748) argued that social and political institutions are not fixed in place and time, as they are variously influenced by climatic conditions. Montesquieu's hypotheses about the effects of the environment upon human ethnographic diversity paved the way for the ensuing theoretical developments of anthropological thought. Among such developments we could mention the rise of evolutionary theories, for their large influence on the evolutionary perspective applied to 'Gypsies' in the following centuries.[77]

According to evolutionism, human culture developed from a primeval, elementary condition into a complex and articulated state through different stages, characterized by sequential degrees of growing complexity. Differences recorded within human groups were due to the uneven path of the evolution of races, a path along which 'Gypsies' seemed to occupy a position of striking backwardness: that of a 'primitive' people.[78]

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[77] See for example F. Predari, *Origine e vicende dei Zingari* (Milan: Lampato, 1841) and A. Colocci's *Gli Zingari. Storia di un popolo errante* (Turin: Loescher, 1889).

[78] This study aims at challenging especially this misleading view. As we will see in Chapters 3 and 4, the representation of the 'Gypsies' as a primitive group is largely responsible for the stereotype of the 'illiterate Gypsy', recently disproved by the emergence of a written Romani literature.

(iii.i) The 'Gypsies'' untamed wildness

The theme of primitivism, as Horigan pointed out,[79] plays a remarkable role within the history of Western thought. It is found in the writings by authors such as Homer, Herodotus, Tacitus and Plini, as well as in the works by medieval authors (Solinus, Isidore of Seville, Albertus Magnus). Moreover, such theme characterizes the travel literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and reached a high degree of popularity especially during the eighteenth century.

The recurrence of this theme testifies to its relevance within European culture, although we cannot identify it with any specific 'current' or school of thought. On the contrary, one of the main features of the reflection on the wild is a fairly contradictory status. This explains why primitive people are likely to be depicted as 'noble' (i.e. close to a sort of edenic condition), but also as 'ignoble' and dangerous creatures.

In their work on primitivism in antiquity, Boas and Lovejoy introduced a distinction between 'chronological' and 'cultural' primitivism. The first is a kind of philosophical history based on the belief that humans enjoyed an ideal condition in a remote past, a Golden Era no longer retrievable. On the other hand, cultural primitivism consists of the belief that civilization enticed men away from a more genuine, 'natural' state (which is presently detectable in the so-called 'primitive' societies). The representations of the 'Gypsies' are especially concerned with the latter of these two tendencies. Admired and envied for their supposed closeness to the state of Nature, they are mainly perceived as a people living in an authentic and unsophisticated condition, still uncorrupted by Western civilization. But this is only

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[79] S. Horigan, *Nature and Culture in Western Discourses* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 51.

the 'positive version' of 'Gypsy' primitivism. Just like the other savages in European history, 'Gypsies' share an ambivalent and contradictory image. They are perceived not only as 'noble' but also as 'ignoble' savages, equally idealized *and* despised, admired *and* feared.[80]

To a certain extent, this incongruity is inescapable, if we consider that a distinguishing characteristic of symbols is their ability to embody multiple, even contrasting connotations, whose activation is inextricably linked to the socio-cultural context. The reason for this ambiguity (in semiotic terms, we could define it as 'arbitrariness') is precisely their reliance on the social context in which they were originated. Symbolic meanings are never fixed nor 'autonomous', because they are the outcome of a dynamic process of social interaction: they are created and continuously re-shaped in the course of this cultural interchange. Their pragmatic, flexible nature cannot be circumscribed and confined without being degraded to the status of the stereotype, within which symbols are 'frozen' in a sort of semantic cluster of crystallized meaning. For this reason we can find abundant evidence of symbolic connotations that, although regarded negatively from an ethnic point of view, are nevertheless invested with a very different meaning in another context or

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[80] Bernard Sheehan further elaborated on the distinction between 'noble' and 'ignoble savagism', emphasizing that 'only a modest twist in logic' is necessary to turn primitive people initially admired for their freedom from the constrictions of modern society into 'savages devoid of nobility precisely because they lacked the usual signs of civil virtue'. In his effective analysis of the English representation of Indians in colonial Virginia, he detected the same 'semantic twist' leading from the first to the second kind of savagism: 'Defined as ignoble savages, the native people of the New World occupied a special place in the European imagination. Possessing none of the components of an ordered society, their only grip upon the world seemed to be the undifferentiated rage that they released upon anyone foolish enough to come within reach. Ignoble savages violated all the limitations imposed on ordinary men by social usage. Violence, treachery, brutality, and destruction were the foundations of savage existence.' (B. W. Sheehan, *Savagism and Civility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 37-38). It may require just a 'modest' conceptual twist to move from a positive to a negative attitude towards savagism, but this semantic alteration may have a major impact on the social plane, as symbolic meanings and projections have often been exploited to support harmful policies of ethnic discrimination or even for genocide.

during another period of time.[81] Furthermore, the mixed feeling about the primitive 'Gypsy' could be related to their interstitial, 'hybrid' status in-between Nature and Culture. This fundamental polarity, as emphasized by Lévi-Strauss, plays a crucial role in the self-affirmation of ethnic groups as opposed to other cultures.[82] By tracing a sort of imaginary boundary that separates their own culture from the external world, humans tacitly affirm their cultural 'superiority' over an alterity projected onto the realm of the wild, the unstructured and the uncivilized.

'Gypsy' primitivism will be here considered from two different (and strictly interconnected) viewpoints: the aesthetic and the ethnic. However despised and marginalized as 'savage' and 'antisocial', or even as unsettling subjects by the dominant society, 'Gypsies' have been valued for the same reason as 'artistic subjects'. In other words, their rejected wildness has been surreptitiously integrated and reassessed from an aesthetic perspective. It is interesting to note that the Roma's reaction to these ambivalent representations of their 'wild nature' is equally ambivalent. On the one hand, Romani authors tend to challenge and deconstruct the aesthetic reductionism (see Chapter 2.iv) applied to Romani nomadism, which perpetuates an unrealistic view of their people and overlooks their social condition. On the other hand, they often seem to rely on a highly idealized interpretation of nomadism and they refer to the works by Gağe authors such as Pushkin and other Romantic poets (which represents a typical example of the intertextual nature of Romani literature).[83]

Adriano Colocci's treatise on the 'Gypsies' (*Gli Zingari*, 1889) could be defined

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[81] On the ambivalent status of the 'Gypsy' image as a consequence of stereotypical labelling, see also Chapter 5.

[82] See C. Lévi-Strauss, *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté* (Paris: Mouton, 1967); pp. 3-13.

[83] See Chapter 4.ii.ii.

as a sympathetic and romanticized depiction of 'Gypsies'' customs and institutions. The reading of his work evokes an impression of 'Gypsy' people as mysterious and fascinating creatures in-between animality and humanity, called to embody an ideal of boundless liberty no longer retrievable by the settled society.

Colocci described the 'Gypsies' as '*uno strano popolo*' (strange people) with '*volti bruni e malinconici* [*e*] *occhi vivacissimi*' (dark, melancholic faces and extremely bright eyes).[84] This people of 'evil spirits' derives the right to roam freely from Iblis.[85] In the eyes of the author, they are the surviving specimens of a vanished world, ruled by fairy tales and myths, frozen in a timeless dimension: '*oggi ancora sono identici a ciò che erano dieci secoli or sono*' (today they are still identical to what they were ten centuries ago); '*il tempo non ebbe la menoma presa su questa razza di bronzo*' (time does not have the slightest hold over this bronze race).[86] According to Colocci, 'Gypsies' are proud of their freedom from the suffocating bonds of civilized society, or rather they are too proud to bend under the load of civilization. Above all, they have an unrestrained passion for nature. To exemplify the natural state of 'Gypsies', Colocci resorts to a literary quotation from Pushkin's drama *The Gypsies*, which he considers as perfectly representative of their actual way of life:

> The 'Gypsies' in a clamorous throng
> Wander round Bessarabia.
> Tonight above a river-bank
> They have spread their tattered tents.
> Their camp-site is, like freedom, gay,
> Peaceful their sleep beneath the heavens;
> Between the wagon-wheels a fire
> Is burning, and the family sits
> Around it, cooking supper; horses
> Graze in the bare field; behind
> The tent a tame bear lies, unchained;
> Everything's alive amid the steppes:
> The peaceful labours of the family,
> Ready to be off at dawn,
> And women's songs, and children's shouts,
> And the travelling anvil's clang.
> But now, a sleepy silence falls

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[84] Colocci, *Gli Zingari*, p. 2; my translation.
[85] The chief of the evil spirits (the equivalent of Satan in Christian religion).
[86] Colocci, *Gli Zingari*, p. 3; my translation.

Over the nomad band; and one can hear
Only the bark of dogs, the neigh of horses,
In the brooding steppes. The lights
Everywhere are doused, all is quiet,
Only the moon is shining, high,
Sheeding her twilight on the camp.[87]

As we can see, 'Gypsies' are here depicted as 'Rousseauian characters', untouched by the corruption of urban civilization. In other words, their portrayal seems to be built on the negative term of an opposition which has at its heart Western society and its institutions. Curiously enough, a few passages later Colocci renounces this 'Rousseauian version' of the 'Gypsies' in favour of a different interpretation: in his eyes their itinerant way of life is not only related to the proud attitude which is distinctive of this 'race', but also to their capriciousness. Indeed, these champions of freedom and independence are driven by the irresistible lure of their unruly will. In another passage Colocci further emphasizes: '*lo Zingaro è incapace di resistere alle sue voglie*' (the Gypsy is unable to resist his desires), he is exceptionally nervous and irascible by nature (pp. 150-151).

This aspect of the 'Gypsy' character appears to be the keynote of the far less romanticized depiction of 'Gypsies' detected in the study of the archivist Francesco Predari. To Predari, 'Gypsies' are idle, canny, impulsive and quick-tempered by nature: any cultural and disciplinary initiative aimed at their betterment is doomed to be unsuccessful, as it is inevitably going to collide with the typifying features of the 'Gypsy race'. Like all the peoples used to living in hot, arid climates, this author affirms, 'Gypsies' lack any aptitude for working the land. Their proverbial indolence makes them only suitable for futile, fruitless occupations which do not require any durable effort or application. It is in depictions of this kind that we may recognize

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[87] From A. Pushkin, *The Bronze Horseman: Selected Poems of Alexander Pushkin*, trans. by D. M. Thomas (London: Secker and Warburg, 1982), p. 110.

the first sinister signs of later racial theories which, as we shall see, were going to open the way for the genocide and the extermination of 'Gypsies'.

Among the negative portraits of 'Gypsies' as a motley crew of tricksters we cannot omit that of Ludovico Antonio Muratori, a highly-regarded scholar, prefect of the *Biblioteca Ambrosiana* in Milan, librarian and archivist. Muratori's *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, a monumental work published in Milan between 1733 and 1751, constitutes an in-depth analysis of the Italian Middle Ages. It includes an impressive amount of documents, chronicles and records drawn from the most varied sources. Such a detailed account of medieval life could not fail to register the presence, in the Italian peninsula, of such a '*pessimum hominum genus*' (awful kind of people). Muratori, like other 'enlightened' intellectuals engaged in a hard fight against any form of superstition and false belief, considered the Middle Ages as ruled by fallacy and irrational fears. In this context impostors such as the 'Gypsies' could thrive thanks to their tricks and robberies. Muratori, who has no liking for these masters in the art of deception, stigmatizes them as a '*spurca gens*' (dirty people) and as '*infamis erronum colluvies*' (a rabble of vagrants).[88]

The philosophical and historical manipulations of 'Gypsy' primitivism cited above proved an effective strategy of ethnic labelling. In an anthropological sense, metaphors of wildness and primitivism are not just ingenious artifices to be confined to a fictitious, poetic realm: they are also, and chiefly, powerful devices to label and classify the diverseness of other cultures.

Human groups generally tend to structure their relationship with alien groups into an opposition between the dimension of Humanity and that of Nature, where the

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[88] Ludovico Antonio Muratori, *De superstitionum semine in obscuris Italiae Saeculis, Dissertatio quinquagesimanona*, in *Antiquitates Italicae Medii Aevi sive Dissertationes* (Milan, 1741).

latter represents the outsider. According to this cognitive scheme, ethnic alterity is therefore depicted in terms of a polarity between what is 'human', that is, representative of 'the Culture' *par excellence* – the embodiment of Humanity and Civility –, and other human groups, degraded to the level of non-human condition. By means of a symbolic projection, the dominant group is able to mark the constitutive boundaries of its culture and, conversely, to alienate other groups through a symbolic confinement within the realm of nature. It is at this level that the artistic image of the 'Gypsy'-noble savage comes to clash with the opposite depiction of 'Gypsies' as 'uncivilized', 'savages' and 'primitives'.

An extremely negative version of the 'Gypsy' as 'ignoble' savage can be found in the texts of Cesare Lombroso, one of the main representatives of the School of Criminal Anthropology and author of the notion of the 'born criminal' (*delinquente nato*). He defined 'Gypsies' as a deviation from the 'normal' human type, a criminal race:

> In the gipsies [*sic*] we have an entire race of criminals with all the passions and vices common to delinquent types: idleness, ignorance, impetuous fury, vanity, love of orgies, and ferocity. Murder is often committed for some trifling gain. The women are skilled thieves and train their children in dishonest practices.[89]

The Italian criminologist supported this thesis by establishing a direct connection between the vicious 'propensities' of the 'Gypsies' and a range of abnormalities detected in their brains, their physiognomy and their physical features. Lombroso, whose theories were influenced by the works of earlier phrenologists and social

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[89] G. Lombroso Ferrero, *Criminal Man According to the Classification of Cesare Lombroso* (New York: Putnam, 1911), p. 140.

evolutionists, was particularly interested in the features of the criminal's skull:

> As the seat of all the greatest disturbances, this part [the head] naturally manifests the greatest number of anomalies, which extend from the external conformation of the brain-case to the composition of its contents. The criminal skull [...] tends to be larger or smaller than the average skull common to the region or country from which the criminal hails.[90]

Criminals also exhibited anomalies such as the 'excessive size of the face compared with the brain-case', strongly developed orbital arches, the 'enormous development of the jaws', progeneism and 'receding forehead as in apes' (pp. 242-243). The 'Gypsies' were classified as 'dolichocephalic' due to the long, narrow shape of their heads. Their physical anomalies were interpreted as an evidence of primitivism and 'atavism' (from the Latin *atavus*, ancestor), that is, a reversion to the past of humanity. The 'Gypsy' type was thought to be closer to apes and savage peoples than to other fellow humans. The nomadism of the 'Gypsies' was also associated with their criminal activities, towards which they were irresistibly 'driven' by their instinct. The anti-social tendencies of this 'race of degenerates' were the result of a specific 'physical and psychic organization, which differs essentially from that of normal individuals' (p. 5).

Interestingly enough, such theories seem to re-enact the same representational pattern found in previous depictions of the 'Gypsy' as a monstrous creature (see 1.i, 2.i). As in earlier disquisitions about this 'monstrous race', the diversity of 'Gypsies' was again defined as 'aberrant', a kind of eccentric deviation from the path of human 'evolution'. Their difference was explained in terms of pathological 'anomaly' – both morphological and psychological – and was encapsulated in a precise human type (or better to say, sub-species): that of the *Homo criminalis*. Once more, the

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[90] G. Lombroso Ferrero, p. 10.

'Gypsies' were projected outside the bounds of 'civilization'.

Criminal anthropologists, however, did not limit themselves to detect such anomalies. They also suggested the most efficient ways to prevent, cure and repress the pursuers of crime. The 'Gypsies', unlike occasional offenders whose crimes were 'only a brief spell of insanity' and were potentially redeemable, were seen as born criminals whose deviancy was incorrigible. This had terrible consequences for the 'Gypsies'. Due to their inherent anti-social tendencies, born criminals can never become members of 'civil' society. Furthermore, their very existence represents a threat to the social order. The only way to deal with them effectively is to place them beyond the possibility of committing their crimes. As we will see in the following section, this is precisely the approach adopted by the Nazi regime in an attempt to 'exterminate' the so-called 'Gypsy menace'.

(iv) Contemporary representations: The cultural construction of social deviance

As we approach the twentieth century, we may easily observe that the innumerable attempts aimed at 'civilizing', 'taming' and 'domesticating' 'Gypsies'' diversity had turned out to be utterly fruitless. Contrary to what one might expect, the patent failure of assimilation strategies did not lead to a substantial change in this kind of policy-making, but to their further implementation. The character of the 'Gypsy' as rebellious savage or as romantic wanderer disdainful of civilized society was bound to make way for a new figure: that of the 'social deviant'.

Just as 'Gypsies' were previously considered 'marginal subjects' by medieval political and religious authorities, or 'aberrant' to the 'enlightened' ones, they

subsequently became the living negation of any order and discipline. They simply appeared not to fit into the socio-political patterns of Western society and were constantly perceived as a drifting mine to be defused at all costs. No conception of ethnic and cultural diversity seemed to cross the legislator's mind while approaching the unending 'Gypsy problem'; such a conception was not compatible with the features of a state system whose growing complexity coincided with a growing intolerance towards the 'deviant'.

As already seen, the lack of recognition of the 'Gypsies' as a separate ethnic group was not a novelty to Western society. However, the passing of the centuries marked a radicalization of this assimilation process into a policy of thorough inclusion of the 'Gypsies' within the ranks of the socially maladjusted. The exotic and romantic aura of the 'Gypsy' was progressively dissolving and was being replaced by a more prosaic reality: the stigmatized image of the 'Gypsy' as nothing but a criminal. This at least was the 'Gypsy' image promoted by Nazi propaganda, which firmly rejected and discouraged any rehearsal of the romanticized representations of 'Gypsies'.

Under the Nazis, 'Gypsies' shared with the Jews the condition of 'foreign elements' within European countries: they were considered an alien, non-Aryan race (although as a matter of fact their language belongs to the Indo-Aryan group). Nazi researchers devoted themselves to a 'scientific' investigation and classification of 'Gypsies', in order to determine and set apart the 'pure' 'Gypsies' (*Zigeneur*) from 'part-Gypsies' (*Zigeunermischling*), the latter being regarded as the 'most dangerous'

because they were considered a degeneration of the original, pure race of nomadic 'Gypsies':[91]

> The Gypsies have indeed retained some elements from their Nordic home, but they are descended from the lowest classes of the population in that region. In the course of their migration they have absorbed the blood of the surrounding peoples and have thus become an Oriental, Western Asiatic racial mixture, with an addition of Indian, Mid-Asiatic and European strains...(...) The Gypsies will generally affect Europe as aliens.[92]

'Gypsies' were thus seen as inherently criminal and *azocials* (asocial), and it was simply impossible to educate and 'rehabilitate' them: their asociality (in other words, their Gypsiness) was in their blood, it was a constitutive feature of their race. Their very existence was therefore seen as a 'menace' to the racial purity of the Germans. For this reason it was absolutely necessary to avoid any contact between Aryans and 'Gypsies'. Abhorred as carriers of a contagious disease, the 'Gypsies' were to be confined to a specific area and finally annihilated. In compliance with a policy of extermination of alien elements for the sake of the 'German blood', 'Gypsies' were then deported to concentration camps and killed. It is estimated that 'at least 400,000-500,000 'Gypsies' perished during the war, whether murdered on the spot, imprisoned, or transported to death camps'.[93]

As far as Italy is concerned, the Fascist regime did not implement any specific legislation against the 'Gypsies' present on its territory. The only measures issued by the Minister of the Interior in 1938 (the same year in which the government adopted a series of anti-Semitic resolutions) concerned the 'Gypsies' moving along the Yugoslavian border. From 1942 'Gypsy' groups were deported to the islands around Italy (Sardinia, Tremiti islands and some islands of the Adriatic) or interned

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[91] According to Ritter's definition, a part-Gypsy (or 'cross-breed') was a person with two 'Gypsies' among his/her great-great-grandparents or a single 'Gypsy' among his/her great-grandparents.
[92] Kenrick and Puxon, 'Gypsies' *under the Swastika*, p. 17.
[93] Liégeois, *Roma, Gypsies, Travellers*, p. 134.

in the concentration camps of Tossicia (Teramo) and Agnone (Isernia), as well as other camps set up for political dissidents.

Under the Fascists, 'Gypsies' were then treated as a potential menace to public safety, rather than being persecuted because of racial reasons. Several scholars emphasize the 'softer' treatment of 'Gypsies' by Italian police and soldiers:

> La sorveglianza [nei] campi era minima e anzi le donne anziane potevano uscire per cercare cibo dai contadini. Dopo l'8 settembre 1943, anziché consegnarli ai tedeschi, i Carabinieri li lasciarono liberi.[94]

As regards 'Gypsies' coming from Yugoslavia, Puxon points out:

> Detention in camps was partly for their own safety because they wanted to return to Yugoslavia to seek relatives and were in danger of falling into the hands of the Ustashi and Germans.[95]

However divergent their anti-'Gypsy' policies might have been, both Fascists and Nazis considered 'Gypsies' a problem of social order. German authorities, in particular, were notably concerned with the *asociality* of 'Gypsies'. Although they persecuted and exterminated 'Gypsies' on racial grounds, the Nazis regarded the 'Gypsy problem' as a matter of non-conformity to the dominant order.

The constitutive features of non-normative behaviour, as anthropologists have amply remarked, may vary in relation to the socio-cultural context. Every society adopts a specific code of conduct which every individual is expected to respect, but the content of this code is likely to change considerably according to group membership and affiliation. In other words, what is classified as a form of deviant behaviour or mental illness among a particular population could be considered as

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[94] Surveillance in the camps was minimal and elderly women were allowed to go out in search of food from the peasants. After September 8th 1943, instead of handing them over to the Germans, the Carabinieri set them free. Mirella Karpati, 'Storia degli Zingari in Italia', in J. P. Liégeois, *Rom, Sinti, Kalé... Zingari e Viaggianti in Europa* (Roma: Lacio Drom, 1994), pp. 270-276 (p. 275); my translation.

[95] Kenrick and Puxon, 'Gypsies' *under the Swastika*, p. 106.

socially appropriate by another population, and vice versa. As far as 'Gypsies' are concerned, they seem to be dwelling in a perpetual condition of deviance, regardless of the historical setting or the geographical location considered. The rejection of the 'Gypsies' appears to be so generalized that we are inclined to think that, for the entire duration of their presence in Europe, they had virtually never experienced a condition of actual recognition and acceptance of their diversity.

Nowadays 'Gypsies' are not persecuted because of their supposed connivance with mysterious, evil entities, or due to their racial features and their cultural diversity. This people is not perceived as a separate ethnic group (the 'Gypsies' are denied any culture, history or homeland), but rather in terms of 'social deviance', and the 'Gypsy problem' is usually dismissed as a question of social *order*. Such dismissal of Romani culture is at the root of the substantial disregard for the dynamic features of Romani culture, some of which (especially the creation of a common language and written literature and the rise of a Romani intelligentsia) will be discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

The current reduction of Romani ethnic and cultural specificity to a form of 'deviance from the rules' perhaps should be mainly ascribed to the process of growing bureaucratization and normativization of Western society. Current social theorists insist on the definition of State as a 'political apparatus (governmental institutions, such as court, parliament or congress, plus civil service officials), ruling over a given territory, whose authority is backed by a legal system and by *the capacity to use force* to implement its policies',[96] and they tend to stress the repressive component of this force. The exertion of force by the State is *regulated* (and fulfilled through a legal system and a police force). The State also relies on

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[96] Anthony Giddens, *Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity, 1997), p. 309; my emphasis.

specific organizations, that is, 'large association[s] of people run on impersonal lines, set up to achieve specific objectives' to achieve its aims and objectives. In order for these organizations to operate efficiently, they require 'a tremendous amount of coordination of activities and resources'. Such coordination is generally accomplished through a bureaucratic structure, which is generally perceived as 'the most efficient form of organization [where] all tasks are regulated by strict rules of procedure'.[97]

Among the characteristics of bureaucracy, Weber includes the presence of a clear-cut hierarchic, pyramidal structure of distribution of roles among its members, a structure regulated by a system of written rules. The normative aspect of power – understood as regulated exertion of force – is strictly connected with the dominant perception of 'Gypsies' as inherently 'antistructural' or, which is even worse, as 'destructured' subjects. As Liégeois pointed out,

> [an] accusation against 'Gypsies' and Travellers is that they 'ignore the most elementary rules'. That is because their own rules are not known and certainly not acknowledged. To the peasant they have always been landless nomads, to the city-dweller persons living on the fringe of the town, to the worker undisciplined idlers and to everybody they are lawless and godless.[98]

To a certain extent, Western society may be seen as a sort of administrative device whose main function is to distribute goods and services. . Moreover, the depersonalizing tendency implicit in the social system is correlative of an analogue tendency to see its members not as individuals endowed with specific cultural features, but as mere units of a wider mechanism whose dynamics are far beyond their sphere of influence. Such a rigid, authoritarian structure implies and foresees the presence of deviant, non-conformist behaviour within itself. To a certain extent,

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[97] A. Giddens, *Sociology*, p. 286; 287.
[98] Liégeois, *Roma, Gypsies, Travellers*, p. 132.

deviance is 'functional' to the system and to its preservation. The Gağe's society needs to continuously confirm its rules by means of the exclusion and the condemnation of difference or deviance (that is, any form of anti-structural behaviour) to point out to its members the socially approved line of conduct, as opposed to what is perceived as deviant, inadmissible conduct. Western European societies tend to regard as 'normal' the behaviour of a citizen who acknowledges and carries out precise duties towards the community to which he/she belongs. On the other hand, such a citizen is also entitled to a certain range of inalienable rights and prerogatives concerning, for instance, the sphere of person and property. We are faced here with an actual 'social agreement' whose acceptance implies the conformation to collectively-sanctioned standards of behaviour.

By the same token, traditional societies tend to establish a collective code of conduct the observance of which is an essential prerequisite to their very survival. As Mary Douglas shows, these societies deal with problems of order and deviance by using some form of witchcraft beliefs. Witchcraft allegations, as already seen in the case of medieval and Renaissance Europe, do not occur at random. They mainly concern subjects dwelling on the margins of society and therefore likely to be labelled as 'dangerous' and 'deviant'. From this point of view, sorcerers and witches represent a sort of outward projection of potentially dangerous and antistructural elements.

Earlier in this chapter, it has been emphasized that 'Gypsies' have been constantly associated with the marginals of all times, and they are still generally regarded as the 'marginal' of Western society *par excellence*. As far as the marginality of the 'Gypsies' is concerned, it may be seen as the result of the exclusive reliance on patterns of deviance to represent their cultural and social features, combined with a

process of persistent fictionalization of the 'Gypsy' image. This has led to a radical displacement of the 'Gypsies' as socially deviant or as merely fictional characters. Some authors point out that the initial perception of peripheral groups as 'exotic' may shift towards their characterization as 'deviant' once they have been incorporated into the dominant society. This shift is generally associated with some kind of theoretical speculation about a supposed tendency of these groups towards criminality and deviance.

The relationship between outsiders and dominant society has been graphically illustrated by Ardener as follows:[99]

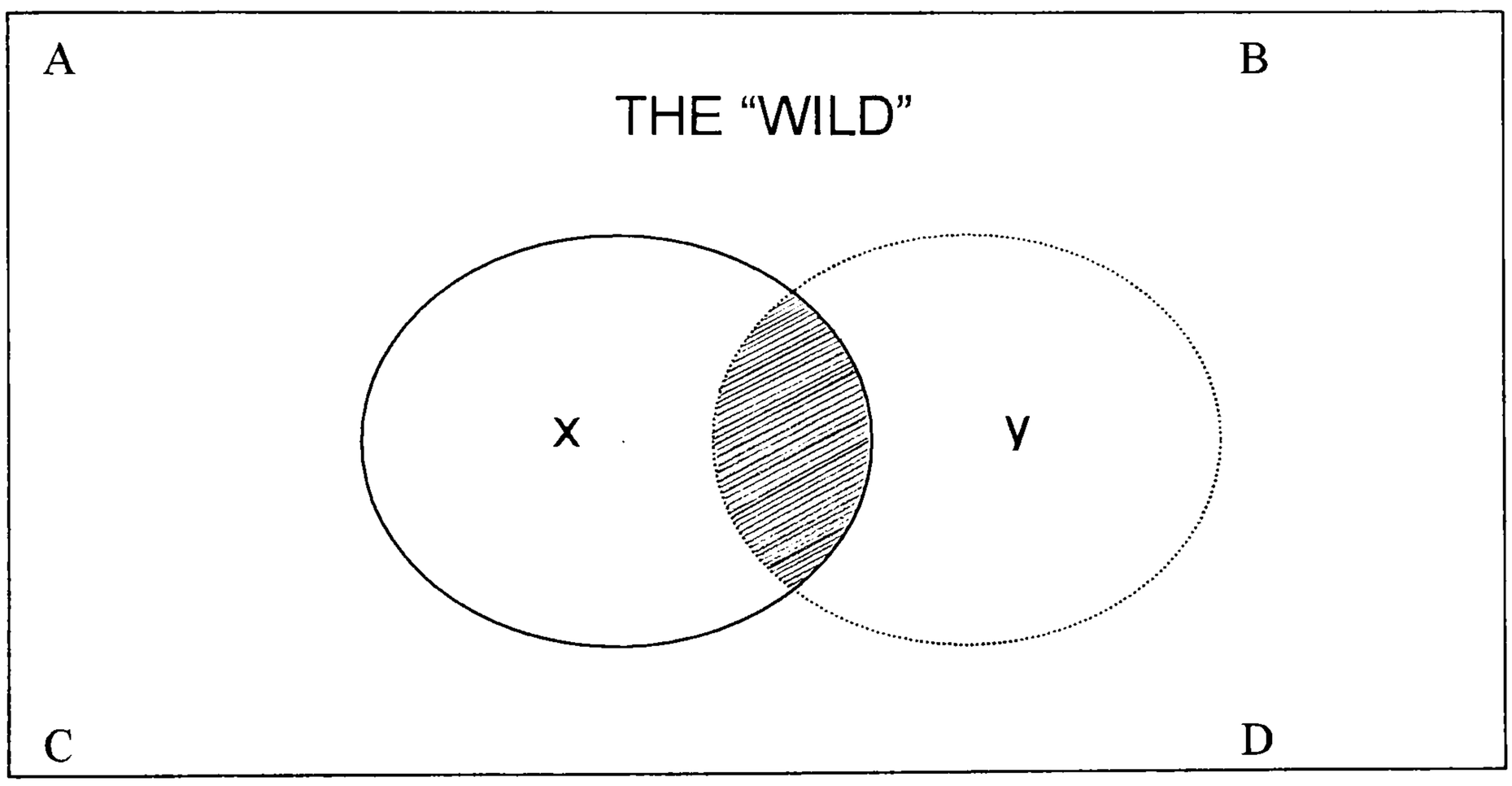

TABLE 1

The dominant society (x) and the marginal group (y) develop a distinct conception of the way in which the world is structured. The shaded portion of the diagram represents the intersection between these world-structures, whereas the surrounding area (ABCD) represents the world of nature and wilderness as opposed to the social domain.

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[99] S. Ardener, ed., *Perceiving Women* (London: Malaby Press, 1975), p. 23.

As can be seen, the condition of a muted group is considered by the dominant group as ambiguous, as it is partly merging with nature (this is the 'muted', romanticized part, which is hidden from the majority) and partly manifested as deviant. Sibley applied this diagram to exemplify the social status of 'Gypsies' as outsiders:

> In categorizing gypsies as an outsider group, [...] we can locate the gypsy world-structure in the framework of the dominant structure, which gives us a romantic portion, y minus the intersection, and a deviant portion, the intersection. The intersection of x and y is an area of deviance; since that part of gypsy culture that is visible in the dominant world-structure is detached, it does not appear to be a part of any culture. Since it does not fit into the social order of the dominant group, manifestations of gypsy culture are labelled as deviant. The remainder of the muted set is the world of the romantic gypsy, who is a part of nature and removed from mainstream society both in space and time.[100]

If until now 'Gypsy' culture has not been adequately recognized and valued, it is mainly because it is not congruent with the hegemonic order, and therefore classified as 'deviant'. On the other hand, 'Gypsies' remain substantially fictional characters removed from the social context and placed in a mythical, distant dimension with no contact with reality. 'Real 'Gypsies'', whose presence on the fringes of our cities is hardly tolerated, are considered as nothing but misfits, deprived subjects. By contrast, 'fictional Gypsies' are frequently idealized and constitute a recurrent theme within European literature and culture. Paradoxically, the only approved 'true Gypsies' are the romanticized ones, as will be seen in the following chapter.

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[100] David Sibley, *Outsiders in Urban Societies* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), p. 18.

(v) A misleading image

The historical overview sketched in this chapter, however condensed and far from exhaustive, has revealed the persistence of a pattern of overall rejection of 'Gypsy' culture and way of life in Italy which is highly representative of the Gağe's attitude towards 'Gypsies' in Western Europe.

As we have seen, in the eyes of the settled population, 'Gypsies' generally seem to embody all that is exotic, unusual and deviant from the dominant social and cultural patterns. But the representations of 'Gypsy' society detected in historical and legalistic texts represent only one side of the coin. By simply relying on these representations, we will never be able to come to a plausible understanding of the reason why 'Gypsies', despite being often considered simply as vagrants and subjected to harsh persecution, are still among us. In fact, the characteristics ascribed to 'Gypsies' over the centuries are mostly the outcome of a process of *cultural construction* of social deviance. As such, they are the result of a biased, one-sided point of view, that of the dominant society.

The fictional image of the 'deviant Gypsy' plays a fundamental role in the control of deviance, as it provides the theoretical justification for harsh policies of exclusion and repression. By forging a fictitious image of the 'Other' (the 'Gypsy' as well as any other deviant), the dominant society is able to deal with marginality and deviance from its rules and standards without addressing the issues of ethnic diversity. Non-conformity to the dominant system becomes merely a question of social order, not a cultural issue. It is a sort of 'induced', deliberate blindness towards alternative socio-cultural patterns which are generally perceived as 'incompatible' with Western canons. In the case of 'Gypsies', the incompatibility seems to be particularly deep and articulated.

On the one hand, we are faced with a form of social incompatibility, which accounts for the representation of 'Gypsies' as inherently deviant and asocial, and has given rise to the repressive measures adopted by Western European governments over the centuries. On the other hand, we may refer to a form of 'cognitive divergence', leading to the lack of recognition of an autonomous 'Gypsy' culture and to its substitution with a fictional, mythical image based on an inverted projection of the dominant value system.[101]

Strategies of cognitive and social repression of 'Gypsy' identity reinforce one another and exert a remarkable influence both on a symbolic plane (as they permeate the language and therefore the everyday life and attitudes of people) and on the social one (as they influence the structure of the 'Gypsy' presence on the territory and are the ultimate cause of their social marginalization). In this context, the role of the written medium is crucial. In this chapter I have maintained that the representations of 'Gypsies' found in texts such as official bans, scholarly treatises and historical documents have been used by the Gağe as a powerful 'idiom of control'. The official character and the aura of 'truthfulness' surrounding the written medium have certainly helped establish such texts (and consequently the 'Gypsies' images they conveyed) as 'authoritative'. On a more specific level, writing has

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[101] An emblematic example of this incongruity is the terminological confusion characterizing the multitude of designations of 'Gypsies'. The very term 'Gypsies', which we have purposely adopted in the first part of this study to reflect its widespread usage, is a sort of 'blanket designation' aimed at embracing an ample range of groups. It should be remarked, however, that this name is unrelated to Romani self-definitions, and in some languages is heavily charged with deprecatory connotations, as in the case of the German term *Zigeuner*. As far as the Roma's self-designations are concerned, they are generally different from those attached to them from the outside, whether for administrative, cultural or political reasons. There are terms related to the alleged origins of 'Gypsies', such as *Bohémiens*, *Gitans*, *Gitanos*, *Giftos*, designations concerning some 'Gypsies''s occupations such as *Giostrai*, *Tinkers*, administrative definitions of 'Gypsies' as *Nomadi*, *Ambulanti* or *Girovaghi*. When considered from an 'emic', internal perspective, however, such definitions prove unsatisfactory, empty categories with no meaning to the Roma themselves. Romani terminology includes names such as *Rom, Roma, Romà, Sinti, Manus, Kalé*, which very rarely penetrate everyday language. These conflicting designations may be regarded as a typical occurrence of the semantic and cultural chasm

provided the Gağe with a range of textual strategies able to create and reinforce a 'Gypsy' representational paradigm which was strictly functional to the dominant social order. As we have seen, Gağe's texts rely heavily on essentialist depictions of the 'Gypsies' (represented as 'ugly', 'mischievous', 'uncivilized' and 'dangerous'). They also make large use of fictional strategies of 'exoticization' and 'de-familiarization' which symbolically displace and marginalize the 'Gypsies' by focusing on their alleged 'deviant' behaviour.[102] Moreover, the textual depictions of the 'Gypsies' as criminals, rebels and vagrants implicitly confirm the 'normality' and 'legitimacy' of the way of life of the majority society.[103]

All in all, Gağe's writing about 'Gypsies' seems to be mainly concerned with the necessity of preserving the hegemonic order (in Gramsci's terms, we could say that such writing strictly serves a 'reproductive function')[104]. This entails the use of rigid, monolithic textual structures inspired by a binary logic and dominated by essentialist categories. In Bakhtinian terms, such structures represent typical instances of 'monologic' writing, that is, texts in which the authoritative voice of the author is the only unchallenged source of knowledge about the 'Gypsies'.[105] Monologic texts such as those analysed in this chapter succeed in reducing the 'Gypsies' to a mute

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dividing Romani and non-Romani cultures, a chasm that is destined to widen progressively, unless a constructive, dynamic relationship of cultural interchange is eventually enabled to take place.

[102] I refer especially to the texts concerning the 'exotic' origins of the 'Gypsies' and their association with mysterious, supernatural entities (see sections 1.i.ii and 1.ii).

[103] As already argued in this chapter, the generalized marginalization of 'Gypsies' was directly connected with their 'reluctance' to conform to the dominant social order. If in medieval times 'Gypsies'' nomadism and occupations were regarded with increasing suspicion (see in particular section 1.i), with the emergence of the modern nation-state, the 'Gypsies' seemed to defy the increasing need for order and the reinforcement of political authority (see sections 1.ii-1.iii). As far as contemporary Western society is concerned, the 'Gypsies' are generally perceived as 'deviant' and potentially 'antistructural' (see secion 1.iv).

[104] See D. Forgaçs (ed.), *A Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988), p. 235.

[105] See M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. by Caryl Emerson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 8.

'object' of representation, rather than addressing them as proper subjects with their own voice. As emphasized by Bakhtin, a monologic approach

> denies the existence outside of itself of another consciousness with equal rights and equal responsibilities, another *I* with equal rights (*thou*). With a monologic approach (in its extreme or pure form) *another person* remains wholly and merely an *object* of consciousness, and not another consciousness.[106]

As will be shown, the features of Romani writing seem to differ substantially from this textual paradigm. In contrast with the 'single-voiced' texts of the Gağe, the texts of the Roma present a high degree of intertextuality[107] and tend to include the voice of the Other in the debate over their identity. In a sense, Romani literature could be seen as the outcome of the dialogic interaction between the Romani voice and the Gağe's communication system. This literature, conceived by the Roma as a site of negotiation of cultural meaning, strives to escape the narrow logic underlying the 'Gypsy' image and may eventually lead to alternative interpretations of the Roma/Gağe relationship. At the moment, however, the Gağe's monologic paradigm is still regarded as the 'official' view on 'Gypsies' and contributes to the confinement of the Romani diversity to the negative pole of a binary opposition ('Them' against 'Us'). To a large extent, such a reductive paradigm can also be detected in the literary depictions presented in the next chapter. As I will try to demonstrate, these texts tend to fix and displace the 'Gypsy' and are responsible for the prolonged camouflage of the Romani identity. Variously portrayed by Gağe authors as an exotic, 'foreign' people, or as 'bon savages' living outside the dictates of the dominant group, the literary 'Gypsies' are another representative example of the Gağe's monologic discourse on the 'Other', although in this case its ethnocentric

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[106] M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, pp. 292-293.
[107] See Section 5.ii.

structure is frequently disguised under the misleading facade of an idealized representation.

2 THE MULTIFACETED AESTHETICS OF 'GYPSINESS': LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF 'GYPSIES' BY NON-'GYPSY' AUTHORS

In the previous chapter I have analysed some of the most popular representations of 'Gypsies' as they progressively emerged over the centuries. As seen in the course of the preceding analysis of the genesis and social function of 'Gypsy' images, these representations have been generally forged and fostered to serve the aims of harsh policies against 'Gypsies'. With the passage of time, these images rapidly gained currency, reaching the stage where they took priority over the domain of 'Gypsy' ethnicity. Gradually but inexorably, the search for the 'genuine' identity of the 'Gypsies' has been neglected and eventually replaced with a 'domesticated' version (which I have named here as the 'fictional Gypsy') whose features were more functional to the needs of the dominant society.[1]

Fictional representations of 'Gypsies', some of which will be discussed in the present chapter, played a fundamental role in the construction and the manipulation of the 'Gypsy' image. Given the tendentiousness of such representations, one could be tempted to dismiss them as mere misconceptions functional to the dominant cultural patterns. From an ethnographic point of view, these representations do not provide us with any factual knowledge of a 'Gypsy' socio-cultural system. On the contrary, they are likely to sidetrack any serious attempt to gain some useful insight into the domain of 'Gypsy' ethnicity. To the aims of this enquiry, however, their study is somehow unavoidable. Biased and tendentious as they might appear, it is

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[1] On the manipulation of the 'Gypsy' image and its progressive 'literarization' see Katie Trumpener, 'The Time of the 'Gypsies', *Critical Inquiry*, 18 (Summer 1992), 843-884; Alaina Lemon, *Between Two Fires*. Daniel Strauss also refers to the cultivation of a 'Gypsy' myth' within the body of German literature, and maintains that 'in all literary genres people have been working away and are still working at a 'type' which has nothing in common with the reality of the ethnic group'. D. Strauss, 'Anti-Gypsism in German Society and Literature', in S. Tebbutt (ed.), *Sinti and Roma. 'Gypsies' in*

still worth dwelling on these images, since to the people of the time they were *reliable* representations in every respect. In this perspective, they can be seen as representative of the non-'Gypsies'' attitude towards Otherness, as samples of their hetero-representations. What is more, some of these images – especially the positive, idealized representations of 'Gypsy' freedom – have been often exploited by the 'Gypsies' themselves and have gradually become an integral part of their self-representations.[2]

Although marginalized, despised and neglected in the eyes of the Gağe, the figure of the 'Gypsy' is a recurrent presence in their texts and cultural representations. By investigating these texts, by highlighting and emphasizing their construction and their internal structure, as well as their ideological basis, we will discover that the marginalization and the silence surrounding 'Gypsies' in the public sphere have been somehow compensated for by a flourishing tradition of literary representations. As literary characters, 'Gypsies' seem to be particularly appealing to Western authors, almost as if they were endowed with an intrinsic aesthetic quality, a figurative connotation that makes them, parodying Lévi-Strauss' noted expression, 'good to be written about'.[3] But in what does their supposed 'aesthetic quality' consist? In which way have 'Gypsies' been employed as artistic topics *par excellence* and reduced to a series of rarefied and artificial images? I would say through a displacement of their alterity from the plane of ethnic diversity to a purely aesthetic dimension. This kind of 'aesthetic reductionism' is closely related to the process of ethnic manipulation to which the diversity of 'Gypsies' has been

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German-Speaking Society and Literature (New York-Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1998), pp. 84-85.

[2] See Section 4.ii.i.

[3] C. Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage* (Paris: Plon, 1962).

constantly subjected since their first appearance in Western Europe. As we will see, this process was to give rise to a plethora of images of the 'Gypsy' with little or no connection with reality. This is how the 'Gypsies', however scorned and marginalized in the social context, became extremely popular as literary characters within the history of European literature. Whether limited to a 'picturesque appendage' – consisting in some sort of frozen, static figures with a mainly decorative function –, or placed at the very centre of the literary mechanism, 'Gypsy' characters have been generally invested with a deep symbolic meaning. They are mostly regarded as forceful images, able to strike the imagination of the reader. The mere mention of the fictional 'Gypsy', however fleeting and incidental, is enough to evoke – as if by some magic virtue – a sense of enchantment and mystery.

The character of the fictional 'Gypsy' is detected across such a large variety of works and genres that it is almost impossible to arrive at an exhaustive analysis of their literary appearances: once we have trespassed into the boundless realm of the artistic creation, the phantasmagorical multiplicity of the 'Gypsy' image becomes irreducible and unrestrained, because it is ruled only by the laws of the imagination. This is why I have adopted a thematic approach to the multifaceted depictions of the fictional 'Gypsy', placing particular emphasis on some key images of major resonance to authors and their public. Although one has to be always aware of the inevitable reductionism underlying any rigid schematization, it is still possible to identify some key images that are symptomatic of the general attitude towards 'Gypsies' and are charged with a deep symbolic significance. The aim of this investigation is not to provide us with a systematic and exhaustive account of the fictional representations of the 'Gypsies', which could be virtually protracted *ad infinitum*, given the endless resources of such representations. Such an account

would not be pertinent to the aims of this study, which is concerned with images, that is, symbolic clusters of meaning, more than with a detailed list of the innumerable manifestations and transmutations of 'Gypsy' characters in the course of time.

The images and themes that follow are not confined to a specific period of time or to a particular literary milieu, but they are drawn from several traditions and are characterized by a number of reciprocal interferences. The reason for this 'mixed' approach is evident, if we consider the 'hybrid' nature of literature, its being a perpetual dialogue transcending national and linguistic borders.[4] What seems to best typify the works of literature is neither the flawless uniformity of a monolithic whole, nor the ungovernable fragmentation of a broken mirror, but rather the dynamic, multiple tensions emerging from a complex web of textual interrelations. Besides, an intertextual approach is also particularly congruent with the main character of the texts: the 'Gypsy'. As literary images, 'Gypsies' – 'nomadic' subjects also on a symbolic plane – undoubtedly reveal a remarkable degree of 'textual translatability'; their presence within the framework of European culture became more and more substantial and eventually came to play a prominent role in the common imagery of the time. In a sense, the literary 'Gypsies' have functioned as a symbolic mirror onto which the settled society has never ceased to project its anxieties, its secret hopes and unconfessed desires.

The literary representations selected in this chapter tend to focus on a Western European scenario. However, they may be seen as representative of a more general

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[4] As general introduction to comparative literary theory see A. Owen Aldridge (ed.), *Comparative Literature: Matter and Method* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964); Claudio Guillén, *Literature as System: Essays towards the Theory of Literary History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971); Siegbert Prawer, *Comparative Literary Studies: An Introduction* (London: Duckworth, 1973); Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983); Susan Bassnett, *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell 1993).

non-Romani view that relies exclusively on written texts as a source of knowledge about the 'Gypsies'. This view is grounded in a conflation of fiction and reality, which was to culminate in a patent, deliberate distortion mostly built on clichés and stereotypes.[5] Some of the images that follow are based on a romantic idealization of the 'Gypsies'' nomadic way of life (such as in the case of Pushkin and Baudelaire), whereas others reflect a negative perception of the Romani people. Furthermore, many of these images seem rather ambiguous, seductive and at the same time disturbing.[6] The aim of the chapter is to identify the general pattern underlying these various, sometimes contradictory images. In general, these depictions are characterized by an enduring tendency to 're-interpret' the components of 'Gypsy' culture, especially the *romanes* (as in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italian literature) and 'Gypsies'' occupations (from fortune-telling to metal working), in the attempt to 'domesticate' and transpose their diversity into Western literary categories. This process of literary transposition seems to re-enact the representational pattern that dominated the Gağe's perception since the arrival of the first bands of 'Egyptians' in Europe. As already pointed out, all the representations analysed in the previous chapter, from the early depictions of the 'Gypsies' as a 'cursed' people to the 'Gypsies' as unrepentant social deviants, appear to be aimed at the same goal: to condemn their lack of conformity with the dominant order. Moreover, such depictions implicitly confirm the 'legitimacy' and 'normality' of the behaviour of the sedentary population. From this point of view, it is possible to

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[5] To a certain extent, this conflation of fiction and reality is also detectable in the literary self-representations by Romani authors. However, in their case the process of literary 'camouflage' is not used to serve the hegemonic purposes of the dominant group, but as a strategy of 'reinvention' and 're-negotiation' of the Romani identity.

[6] As we will see in Chapter 5, this ambivalence seems to be related to the cognitive structure of stereotypical thought.

maintain that the representations of the 'fictional Gypsy' succeeded in projecting the Romani identity at the margins of the dominant society and played a major role in reinforcing the symbolic boundary between 'Them' and 'Us'.

(i) The 'monstrosity' of the fictional 'Gypsy'

> Cingar scampasoga, cimarostus, salsa diabli,
> accortusque ladro, semper truffare paratus,
> in facia scarnus, reliquo sed corpore nervax,
> praestus in andatu, parlatu, praestus in actu,
> semper habens testam nudam penitusque tosatam.
> Praticus ad beffas, truffas, zardasque soiasque,
> deque suo vultu faciens plus mille visazzos,
> et simulans varias sguerzo cum lumine morfas,
> pochis vera loquens voltis, mala guida viarum
>
> **(Baldus, IV, 82-90)**

As noted in the first chapter, the first impression made by the 'Gypsies' on the settled population was by no means favourable, not even in terms of outward appearances. 'The ugliest people ever seen', this is how 'Gypsies' had been harshly stigmatized by medieval chroniclers. If regarded from an anthropological perspective, the 'ugliness' of 'Gypsies' is to be chiefly related to their ethnic diversity, which was perceived in terms of 'deviance' from the norm and consequently charged with a rather negative meaning (see 1.i.i). As will emerge in the course of this analysis, the perception of 'Gypsies' as deviant subjects is also to be found in numerous literary texts by non-'Gypsy' authors, who represented their 'deviancy' either in physical terms, that is, as a form of bodily deformity, or more in general as a kind of 'ethno-cultural

monstrosity'.[7] In order to fully appreciate the cultural roots of the 'monstrous' features attributed to the fictional 'Gypsy', we first need briefly to reconstruct the theoretical background underlying the literary trope of the 'monstrous characters', among which the 'Gypsies' emerge as leading figures.

As will be seen, 'Gypsies' are frequently looked upon as 'anomalous' subjects, if compared to the 'normal' features and way of life of the settled population. Almost every feature of 'Gypsy' culture, from clothing to language, from external appearance to specific customs, occupations and patterns of settlement, seemed to conspire to highlight their strangeness and deviance from the norm.[8] To the sedentary population, 'Gypsy' diversity was to be seen as a kind of 'cultural monstrosity',[9] and this perception amply reverberated throughout the literary texts of the time.

In their article on the construction of the 'Gypsy' figure in early modern Italian

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[7] The term *monstrum* originally penetrated into the Latin from a translation of the Greek *teras*, a word denoting extraordinary events (*portenta* or *monstra*), such as anomalous births of animals and men, or inexplicable atmospheric phenomena. Such *monstra* were considered as manifestations of a divine will and were generally interpreted as predictive signs to be deciphered (the term is connected with the verb *monere* (to warn), and can therefore be interpreted as 'warning', 'thing to be pointed at'). Subsequently, the word came to acquire an additional range of meanings, and has been gradually extended from an individualized connotation of *monstra* as single individuals or events, to a collective denotation embracing entire groups of men: the 'monstrous races'. During the Middle Ages, as shown by John Friedman, alongside the classical meaning of the word *monstrum* designating phenomena *para physis* (*contra natura*), entailing a religious meaning, a new, less transcendent connotation began gradually to emerge, which was to be used to define 'any people who deviated from Western cultural norms'. (J. B. Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 109). The semantic ambivalence of *monstrum* is somehow echoed by the divergent connotation of the words 'miracle', used to designate phenomena occurring outside nature, which were thought to be revelatory of a divine power, and 'marvel' (prodigy), referred to some anomalous events detected within the domain of natural phenomena. Despite the ambiguous interpretations attached to monstrous phenomena, the reaction to their occurrence was probably going to be of a similar kind, that is, a reaction of surprise caused by the perception of some form of dissonance and deviancy from the proper order of things.

[8] The lack of conformity of individuals to their class was perceived as a form of aberration, whereas 'holiness' (which is the contrary of abomination) was associated with the idea of separateness, order, as well as completeness and wholeness: 'Holiness requires that individuals shall conform to the class to which they belong. And holiness requires that different classes of things shall not be confused. (...) Theft, lying, false witness, cheating in weights and measures, all kinds of dissembling (...) are clearly contradictions between what seems and what is'. (M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, pp. 53-54).

[9] See L. Piasere, 'La mostruosità culturale: gli Zingari nell'Italia moderna', in *Etnosistemi*, 3 (1996),

literature,[10] Campigotto and Piasere argue that these literary depictions exemplify a sort of 'inability' of the 'Gypsies' to fit into the dominant patterns of cognitive classification, typically based on a logic of true/false, everything/nothing. In this regard, the authors mention a number of literary figures that populate early modern Italian literature, among which are Margutte (in Pulci's *Morgante*), Brunello (in Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato*), 'Cingar' (in Folengo's *Baldus*), and the 'Gypsy' characters in the *Zingaresche*.[11] These fictional 'Gypsies', however dispersed throughout a wide range of texts and genres, seem to bear a close affinity, a sort of 'family resemblance'. They are all endowed with some 'monstrous', 'grotesque' qualities, whether in the form of physical deformity (as in the case of Margutte) or, more in general, of ethnic and linguistic hybridity. Unsurprisingly, the literary works that were most likely to host such figures are to be found within the most 'subversive', carnival 'stream' of Italian literature, a very popular tradition largely influenced by the oral tradition.

63-73.

[10] A. Campigotto and L. Piasere, 'From Margutte to Cingar: the archeology of an image', in *100 Years of 'Gypsy' Studies*, ed. M. T. Salo (Cheverly, MD, 1990), p. 19.

[11] See also other monstrous figures such as the mandrake-man in Ludwig von Arnim's *Isabella von Aegypten*, Quasimodo in Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* and Rabelais' Pantagruel.

(i.i) The 'Gypsies' in the *Zingaresche* and the comedies

The term *Zingaresca* has been employed to designate different aspects of a literary work. Originally, the *Zingaresca* was nothing more than a mode of rhyming widely used within the context of Italian popular literature.[12]

As lyric compositions (recorded as belonging to the genre of popular literature known as *frottole*) the *Zingaresche* date back at least to the fifteenth century, when the character of the *Zingara* ('Gypsy' woman) entered the *canti carnascialeschi* (carnival songs), becoming a recurrent presence within the body of Italian popular folklore.[13] The following example of *Zingara song*, drawn from a collection of Renaissance *canti carnascialeschi* from Tuscany, is highly representative of the traditional narrative pattern of these compositions.

CANZONA DELLE ZINGANE
(by Guglielmo, surnamed 'Il Giuggiola', XVI c.)[14]

Deh, qualche carità a noi meschine,
prive d'ogni speranza e peregrine.

Zingane siàn, come vedete, tutte
per gran forza di pioggia e neve strutte;
ad abitar con voi siàn qui condutte
con questi figli in braccio, sì tapine.

Di paesi lontani e di stran loco,
lasse, venute siàno a poco a poco,
sol per darvi diletto, festa e gioco,
se carità darete a noi meschine.

Ècci fra noi chi ha buon naturale
da lavorar di mano e 'ngegno tale

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[12] This *Zingaresca* was characterized by a specific metric pattern consisting of 'three strophes of three lines, the two first of septenary, and the third of hendecasyllabe, with the rhyme in the middle, which divides an initial septenary from a quatrain which begins with a consonant, or by a quintain beginning with a vowel. The position of the rhyme would be as follows: *a b* ^{b} *c, c d* ^{d} *e'*. E. Lovarini, 'Remarks on the "Zingaresche"', *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*, 3 (1891-1892), 89-90.

[13] The denomination of *Zingaresche* is connected with the use of 'Gypsy' costumes during the recitation of the poems.

[14] C. S. Singleton (ed.), *Canti carnascialeschi del Rinascimento* (Bari: Laterza, 1936), pp. 110-111.

che nessun'altra a noi saria eguale;
dunque pietà prendete in noi meschine.

Di sonar, di danzar usiàno ognora
con chi vorrà di voi; farénvi ancora
un gioco: 'che l'è drento e che l'è fòra',
che suave piacer porge nel fine.

Buona ventura udir da noi potrete,
se 'l vostro sopra 'l nostro metterete,
la man, dico, leggiadra: intenderete
di vostro corso dal principio al fine.

Però, care madonne, aprite porte,
le qual chiuse tenete strette e forte,
prima che sopravvenga in voi la morte:
prende piacer di noi povere tapine.

The 'Gypsy' characters try to move their hearers to pity by mentioning all the discomforts and hardships of their nomadic way of life, at the mercy of the inclement weather. The *Zingane* define themselves as being '*prive di ogni speranza*' (hopeless) and *peregrine*, that is, in search of help and compassion. The target of their pleadings seems to be some *madonne* (ladies), to whom they promise to bring '*diletto, festa e gioco*' (delight, good time and amusement) and predictions for a prosperous future, the '*buona ventura*'.

In patent contrast with the pitiful and humble tone displayed by the *Zingane* in the first part of the song, towards the end we are faced with some salacious allusions of a sexual kind. An erotic meaning is detectable, for instance, in the reference to the game '*che l'è dentro e che l'è fòra*' (line 17), in the expression '*se 'l vostro sopra 'l nostro metterete*' (line 20), and in the final invitation to the madonne '*aprite porte / le qual chiuse tenete strette e forte*' (lines 23-24).

We may notice here a curious ambivalence about the *Zingane* of this song: they are both tearful, pathetic figures, likely to arouse feelings of pity and commiseration,

and also jocose, witty characters perfectly in tune with the spirit of the Carnival.[15] From the second half of the sixteenth century, when the texts and the structure of the *Zingaresche* began to gradually evolve into an independent genre and to acquire a dramatic form, the character of the *Zingara* is also to be found in the *contrasti* (poems with a dialogic structure in which two characters confront each other in a sort of linguistic duel), in which the *Zingara* usually is opposed to the mask of the peasant.[16]

It is in the farces and comedies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (especially in the *commedia dell'arte* and in the *commedia ridicolosa*)[17] that the 'Gypsy' characters came to enjoy a high degree of popularity, even though their role is hardly comparable with those of *Pantalone*, *Zanni* and other famous masks. The figure of the 'Gypsy' woman displays a certain degree of fixity and stereotypization, which is typical of the characters in sixteenth-century Italian comedy, however

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[15] Some authors have clearly detected the existence of this ambiguity and emphasized that throughout Renaissance imagery 'Gypsies' seem to be considered as emblems of comedy and poverty at the same time. This is how they appear in the *Iconologia* by Ripa, author of the famous drawing of the 'Gypsy' which we can admire on the frontispiece of Ariosto's *Commedie* (1622, Codex Urbinate latino 688, Tav. 1). Quoting Ripa's works, Gordon points out that 'the figure of the 'Gypsy' is used (...) as emblematic of Comedy and of Poverty. Comedy is represented as: — 'Donna in habito di Cingara: mà il suo vestimento sarà di varij colori, nella destra mano terrà un cornetto da sonar di musica, nella sinistra una maschera, & ne' piédi i socchi'' (a woman in a 'Gypsy's costume. Her dress however should be of various colours; in her right hand she should carry the horn which is used as a musical instrument; in her left hand she should have a mask, and she should wear socks on her feet). (D. J. Gordon, '"Gypsies" as emblems of comedy and poverty', in *Journal of the 'Gypsy' Lore Society* 3 (1944), p. 39). The features of this costume are so interpreted by Ripa: the 'various colours' of her dress are meant to reflect the variability and complexity of the cases of human life that the comedy is meant to represent. The socks are a clear allusion to the *stile mediocre* that characterizes the comedy in contrast with, for instance, the tragic or the elegiac genre. Besides, the author informs us that 'Gypsies' are considered to be emblems of Comedy because this genre '*hà propositioni facili, & attioni difficili*' (contains suggestions that are easy to make and actions that are difficult to carry out) (p. 40). According to this interpretation, 'Gypsies' are particularly keen to promise goods and riches that are completely unknown to them, due to their extreme indigence, which is precisely the reason why they are considered to be symbols of poverty, as '*non si può trouare la più meschina generatione di questa, la quale non hà ne robba; né nobiltà, né gusto, ne speranza di cosa alcuna*' (a poorer folk than this is not to be found; for they have neither property nor nobility nor taste, nor hope of anything'). (D. J. Gordon, '"Gypsies" as emblems of comedy and poverty', p. 41).

[16] See Paolo Apolito, 'Canti di maledizione degli Zingari', *Lacio Drom*, 3-4 (1977), 2-17.

[17] The *commedie ridiculose* (ridiculous comedies) were written and acted by amateur authors and actors and enjoyed great popularity in Italy during the seventeenth century.

balanced by the practice of improvisation on a pre-existing *canovaccio*. The part of the *Zingara* is usually concerned with the activity of fortune-telling and an amazing dexterity in disentangling the most baffling, comic imbroglios.[18] However stereotyped and repetitive, the features of the *Zingara* are constantly invested with an exotic connotation, as already found in the texts of the carnival song quoted above. '*Di paesi lontani e di stran loco, / lasse, venute siàno a poco a poco*', states the song by 'Il Giuggiola'; '*noi siamo Indiani, / veri cinguli di natura; / abitiamo in lochi strani / e sapiamo dar ventura*', it is sung in the *Canzona degli Indiani*.[19] The 'Gypsy' woman in the comedy *La Zingana* by G. A. Giancarli[20] is the only character whose place of origin is located outside the Venetian *Dominio*, in northern Africa. She presents herself as a *mora*, born '*al monte del Barca, sul Barberia*' (III 415), a distant, savage region (*luga selvadega*, that is, wild places) where the people are '*bestial, marfus, cattiba*' (III 415).[21] Within Giancarli's play, the 'Gypsy' woman is a *forestiera*,[22] her 'foreignness' being stressed by the oddity of her clothes and primarily by her language, a form of mangled Arabic that was meant to mime the 'Gypsy' tongue. This leads us to consider another crucial feature of the character of the 'Gypsy' woman: her polyglossia.[23] As Piasere emphasizes, the characters in this

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[18] Pandolfi, *La commedia dell'Arte: Storia e testi*, 5 vols (Florence: Sansoni, 1957-61), V, 241.

[19] C. S. Singleton (ed.), *Canti carnascialeschi del Rinascimento*, p. 504. This is the first literary text in which 'Gypsies' are named 'Indians' (Piasere 1996: 63), a term which in the sixteenth century referred to a vast geographical area including countries such as Egypt and Ethiopia.

[20] Gigio Artemio Giancarli, a Venetian playwright born in Rovigo between 1506 and 1508 and member of the theatre company of the 'Liquidi', was the author of a large corpus of comedies, tragedies and poetic works. Unfortunately, only two of his comedies have reached us: *La Capraria*, published in 1544, and *La Zingana*, published in 1545.

[21] The Moors were the inhabitants of Barberia, also named Berberia or Barbaria, that is, northern Africa.

[22] *Forestieri* is the Venetian term for 'foreigners'.

[23] This manipulation of the language is itself a constitutive feature of the *commedia dell'arte* in general, and chiefly of the *ridiculosa*. The sixteenth century saw the emergence of an intense debate about the features of the Italian literary language, the well-known *questione della lingua* that is somehow reflected in the multilingual structure of Italian comedy and in its experimental vocation. As far as the comedy is concerned, the primal function of this multilinguism was to produce comic

play are marked off by a wide range of languages, among which are the *greghesco* (a pidgin combining Venetian and Greek, both modern and old), the Italian language, the *pavano*, and the language spoken by the *Zingana* (an hybrid jargon mingling Venetian with Arabic). The multilingual feature of the play, aimed at achieving a parodic, comic effect, testifies to the author's opposition to the idea of an 'orthodox', monolingual and regulated work of art, as theorized and promoted by scholars and academics of the time. It was a patent non-alignment (involving also other important exponents of Venetian comedy, such as Andrea Calmo) with the classicist, normative approach that was due to dominate the literary and artistic scene for a long time.[24]

The challenging, experimental nature of the Venetian multilingual comedy was soon to give ground to other, more 'regular' literary trends, but its significance has been undeniable, both from a literary and an anthropological perspective. Rather than being only the outcome of a sterile experimentalism, as scholars point out, these comedies succeed in providing us with an effective depiction, in literary terms, of the multiethnic reality of the Venetian State.[25] From this point of view, such works could be considered as a manifestation of specific popular ethnologies and are therefore indicative of the manner in which people approached and perceived the issue of cultural diversity. In these plays, the 'Gypsy' is presented as a foreigner, a condition which is clearly epitomized by the use of an incomprehensible, hybrid

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effects, by means of a process of phonetic alteration of the words: the language of the Venetian character is marked by the use of the *ze*, that of the Jew by the *i*, the Frenchman by the *e* and the *sce*, and the language spoken by the *Zingana* is characterized by the substitution of the *u* for the *o*. The result was an exhilarating, almost cacophonous mingling of sounds, a 'mimetic', 'simulated' polyglossia within which the language was subject to a bizarre, amusing deformation. As for the language attributed to the *Zingana*, the impression it was meant to cause on the audience was likely to be that of a strange, foreign idiom, if not of a proper jargon, as in the case of Giancarli's *Zingana*.

[24] The late sixteenth century saw a remarkable increase of academic literary theorization. It was also a time of 'religious restoration', as testified by the advent of the Counter-Reformation, which did not fail to extert its influence on the content of the comedy.

[25] See for example G. Folena, *Il linguaggio del caos* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1991).

idiom. My contention is that the diversity of the *Zingana* was not harmonized within the ethnic scenario of the *Serenissima* primarily because it was not accepted in the real social context. From this point of view, the linguistic eccentricity of this character could be interpreted as a (negative) symbolization of her ethnic diversity.

It is interesting to note that the status of 'Gypsies' as outsiders granted them the right of abode among other literary 'deviants'. For instance, the fictional 'Gypsy' bears significant similarities with the character of the *pícaro*, and, more in general, with the ranks of vagrants, thieves and beggars dominating the 'literature of roguery',[26] whose status was surrounded by an unfavourable attitude (see the negative connotation of the *pícaro* in the mid-sixteenth century). It is not accidental then that the 'Gypsy' characters should be found in *genres* which are considered 'alternative' to mainstream, classical literature such as comedy, burlesque poetry, and the comic epic in *macaronic*. Neither is it surprising that the monstrous, hybrid character of the 'Gypsy' is located in experimental texts enacting an apparent reversal of the hegemonic order and a triumph of the 'carnivalesque' and the 'grotesque'. In his work on Rabelais, Bahktin emphasizes that in carnival, life is represented as turned 'inside out':

> the laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is non-carnival, life are suspended during carnival: what is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it – that is, everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people.[27]

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[26] See F. W. Chandler, *The Literature of Roguery* (London: Boston, Mass: Archibald Constable, Houghton, Mifflin, 1907), A. Parker, *Literature and the Delinquent: The Picaresque Novel In Spain And Europe, 1599-1753* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1967). See also R. Alter, *Rogue's Progress: Studies In The Picaresque Novel* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1964), R. Bjorson, *The Picaresque Hero in European Fiction* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), and H. Sieber, *The Picaresque* (London: Methuen, 1977).

[27] M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp.122-123.

Such inversion of the hegemonic order, however, is necessarily confined to a well-defined narrative frame. In this frame all that is anarchy, hybridity and ambiguity is 'ritualised' and somehow 'defused'. By the same token, the literary transposition of the subversive character of the 'Gypsy' is aimed at symbolically encapsulating and displacing his/her life and culture at the margins of what is perceived as 'normal', 'natural' behaviour. In this sense, the depictions of the monstrous 'Gypsy' function as an 'idiom of control'[28] and stigmatize the lack of conformity of the 'Gypsies' in terms of delinquency and abnormality.

(ii) The 'Gypsy' image between social critique and political allegory

There is a subtle, yet pervasive connotation surrounding Gağe's innumerable representations of the 'Gypsy', which is largely liable for the fascination and the mysterious lure evoked by the 'Gypsy' image over the centuries. Whether we consider the depiction of 'Gypsies' within historical and legal documents or we look at their literary fictionalization, authors seem to deal with a similar, often discomforting feeling: that of being confronted by some shifting, 'unstructured' subjects, whose dominant feature is a sort of indomitable independence and 'wildness'. The innumerable attempts to 'tame' and 'domesticate' this rebellious image were doomed to be substantially unsuccessful, as awkward, vain efforts to overcome an irresistible force belonging to a different dimension: that of Nature.

In a sense, the very process at the origin of artistic creation could be somehow defined as the result of some 'anarchic', creative condition, and the work of art,

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[28] M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 139.

accordingly, as the application of an identifiable, aesthetic pattern to the turbulent conceptual flow that we call human imagination. From this point of view, even the most composed, Apollonian beauty could be considered the outcome of a previous state of protean, Dionysian creativity. Is not madness, the physical embodiment of this condition of disorder, a well-established metaphor of the artist and its creation? As we will see, for most authors it was the wild, the 'unstructured', rather than the flawless perfection of classical forms that was particularly appealing in aesthetic terms. This unstructured, fluid condition has been frequently associated with 'Gypsy' characters, who seems to 'deviate' from the conventional rules of a given culture.

Generally speaking, European art and literature – especially during the eighteen century – are pervaded with a marked tendency to look at the domain of nature and wildness, as well as at 'primitive' subjects, as a precious source of inspiration and artistic fulfilment. This overall positive attitude is also detectable within the political discourse of the time, which looked at nature as a dimension alternative to civilization (and to bourgeois canons) and substantially closer to the genuine essence of man. The political debate about the issue of wildness culminated in the discourse on the 'noble savage' (as theorized for example by Jean-Jacques Rousseau). It is within such debate that 'Gypsies' emerged as appealing 'pretexts' for discussion. As pointed out in Chapter 1, the birth of scientific studies on 'Gypsy' culture and customs is inextricably interwoven with their manipulation and subordination to philosophical and political arguments. Eighteenth-century writers and thinkers idealized 'Gypsies'' closeness to a natural state as an idyllic condition still preserved from the corrupting influence of civilization. This was clearly a rearrangement of the character of the 'noble savages' as firstly described by Columbus on his first journey

of discovery:

> all these islands are densely populated with the best people under the sun; they have neither ill-will nor treachery. All of them, women and men alike, go about naked as their mothers bore them [...]. They have neither iron nor weapons, [...] and I have not learned that any of them have any private property;[29]

and notably interpreted in philosophical terms in Montaigne's *Essays*:

> c'est une nation [...] en laquelle il n'y a aucune espèce de trafique; nul cognoissance de lettres; nulle science de nombres; nul nom de magistrat, ny de superiorité politique; nul usage de service, de richesse ou de pauvreté; nuls contrats; nulles successions; nuls partages; nulles occupations qu'oysives; nul respect de parenté que commun; nuls vestemens, nulle agriculture; nul metal; nul usage de vin ou de bled.[30]

This interpretation of primitive men as 'noble savages' was also applied to 'Gypsies' (Europe's savages) as testified by their depiction as 'natural men' appearing in several literary works of the time – especially in Cervantes' *Gitanilla*, which established a literary image of the 'Gypsies' of extraordinary popularity and durability. In the following section I will highlight some influential manifestations of the 'Gypsy' as 'noble savage' across the centuries. The aim of this overview is to show how writers of different periods and backgrounds have regarded the 'Gypsies' in a similar fashion, that is, as a vehicle for an ideological and social critique. I will initially focus on the *Gitanilla* by Cervantes. This text could be considered the 'paradigm' for later authors who made use of the theme of 'Gypsy' primitivism and chose the 'Gypsies' as a mirror image to reflect on Western society, such as Henry Fielding, whose depiction of 'Gypsies' is included in this survey.

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[29] Quoted in M. Zamora, 'Christopher Columbus' "Letter to the Sovereigns of 4 March 1493": Announcing the Discovery', in *New World Encounters*, ed. by S. Greenblatt (London: University of California Press, 1993), p. 4.

[30] 'Those people have no trade of any kind, no acquaintance with writing, no knowledge of numbers, no terms for governor or political superior, no practice of subordination or of riches or poverty, no contracts, no inheritances, no divided estates, no occupations but leisure, no concern for kindship – except such as is common to them all – no clothing, no agriculture, no metals, no use of wine or corn'. M. de Montaigne, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), p. 204; trans. by M. A. Screech.

Apparently, the 'Gypsies' represent the main subject of these depictions and their way of life is presented as a model for the Gağe. In fact, the primary role played by these 'Gypsies' is purely transitory and instrumental, since the focus of the narration remains steadily on the dominant society and its institutions. In other words, the difference of 'Gypsies' is manipulated and re-shaped according to the features of the hegemonic system.

(ii.i) The 'Gypsies' as 'noble savages' in Cervantes' *Gitanilla*

The portrayal of 'Gypsies' in Cervantes' *Novelas Ejemplares* is particularly indicative of the above-mentioned manipulation of the 'Gypsy' image. Preciosa, the main character of the *Gitanilla*, is a 'Gypsy' girl of exceptional beauty and wisdom. A noble young man, Don Juan de Cárcamo, impressed by her incomparable qualities, proposes marriage to her. In order to fulfil his dream, he gives up his highly respectable and comfortable life to join the despised condition of the 'Gypsies'. He agrees to Preciosa's request that he should live among her people for two years before the marriage can take place. The girl seems well disposed towards the young man, but she is also determined to preserve her free-will and her virginity, here described as her 'only jewel'.[31]

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[31] This feature is in dramatic contrast with the sensual figure of Carmen (in Mériméee's novel), which came to epitomize in the imagination of the non-'Gypsies' the figure of the 'Gypsy' woman. Unrestrained sexuality was certainly considered to be a typical feauture of a primitive people such as the 'Gypsies' (see the theories of Colocci and Predari on 'Gypsy' primitivism, Section 1.iii.i). On a slightly different plane we may look at Zemfira, the main female character of Pushkin's *Tsygani* (see this chapter, section 1.iv.ii), whose marital infidelity is the cause of her violent death. A few verses before the tragic episode, the old 'Gypsy' had warned Aleko about the nature of 'Gypsy' women: 'She is a child, / And you should treat her moods more lightly. / To you, love is a serious business, / But a girl's heart treats it as a joke. / Look up: look at the distant moon; / She sheds an equal radiance / On

The example of Preciosa appears to seriously challenge the popular views of 'Gypsies'. Far from being completely wild and lawless, Cervantes seems to suggest, they have a precise code of conduct, and instead of being naturally prone to lust, they set a high value on virginity and marriage. The values of morality embodied by Preciosa, however, are in sharp contrast with the customs of the 'Gypsies', described in the opening passage of the story as follows:

> Parece que los gitanos y gitanas solamente nacieron en el mundo para ser ladrones: nacen de padres ladrones, críanse con ladrones, estudian para ladrones, y, finalmente, salen con ser ladrones corrientes y molientes a todo ruedo, y la gana del hurtar son en ellos como accidentes inseparables, que no se quitan sino con la muerte.[32]

By placing this passage at the very beginning of the *novela*, the author immediately puts 'Gypsies' in a bad light, influencing negatively the reading of the rest of the story.[33]

Being thieves appears to be something more than a negative tendency within 'Gypsy' society, and it is also more than a social stigma attached to them from the outside: it seems to be inscribed in their genes, to be a substantial, emblematic feature of their nature. In other words, 'Gypsies' embody the very essence of theft, and this phenomenon is perpetuated among them from generation to generation.

Whether we are inclined to consider this 'quality'[34] of 'Gypsies' as genetically

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everything she passes over. / She will call briefly on a cloud, / Light it up brilliantly – but then / She's off again to another, where / She also won't stay long'.

[32] 'Gipsies [*sic*] seem to have been born into the world for the sole purpose of being thieves: they are born of thieving parents, they are brought up with thieves, they study in order to be thieves, and they end up as past masters in the art of thieving. Thieving and the taste for thieving are inseparable from their existence, and they never abandon them till they reach the grave'. From M. de Cervantes, *Novelas ejemplares*, p. 61; translated by C. A. Jones.

[33] The term *ladrones* (thieves) and the related word *hurtar* appear a good five times in the first sentence, and are arranged in a crescendo, a sort of rhetorical climax. The negativity of the description is further worsened by its location, at the very opening of the *novela*.

[34] The Latin word *qualitas* derived from *qualis*, 'how constituted', 'as a thing is'. The term here is interpreted in a philosophical sense, as 'that characteristic a) which is possessed by a thing and b) by which the thing is recognizable' (cfr. Peter A. Angeles, *A Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1981), p. 233.

transmitted or as learned through the process of inculturation, we are finally notified that they have a kind of 'culpable propensity' to steal, as they somehow enjoy doing it. Genetic predisposition and inheritance, apprenticeship and censurable conduct, all these elements conspire to create in the reader an attitude of moral condemnation towards these unrepentant criminals. We are told that 'Gypsies' are born criminals and that they have consciously chosen to keep themselves outside the bounds of the law. There is a substantial divergence between this negative portrayal and the overall depiction of 'Gypsies' in the *novela*, where the author provides us with a 'sympathetic' representation of 'Gypsies':

> [...] Nos vivimos alegres; somos señores de los campos, de los sembrados, de las selvas, de los montes, de las fuentes y de los ríos. Los montes nos ofrecen leña de balde; los árboles, frutas; la viñas, uvas; las huertas, caza; sombra las peñas, aire fresco las quiebras, y casas las cuevas. [...] No nos fatiga el temor de perder la honra, ni nos desvela la ambición de acrecentarla. [...] Por dorados techos y suntuosos palacios estimamos estas barracas y movibles ranchos [...] tenemos lo que queremos, pues nos contentamos con lo que tenemos.[35]

The 'Gypsies' appear to lead a life in perfect accordance with the laws of nature. They do not value comfort, money and unessential luxuries, and they cherish their huts as if they were 'sumptuous palaces'. They are also immune from one of the worst misfortunes of non-'Gypsy' society: the thirst for ambition and honour. Compared with the materialistic and artificial values of the dominant society, this natural lifestyle seems to represent a sort of utopian model, an ideal that has been forsaken by the settled population with the advent of civilization. From the reading of the *novela*, we can clearly detect a conspicuous number of contrasts and clashing

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[35] 'We lead a happy life, we are lords of the fields and crops, of the forests, of the woods, of the springs and for the rivers. The woods offer us free fuel, the trees give us fruits, the vine grapes, the gardens vegetables, the springs water, the rivers fish, and the preserves game; the rocks give us their shade, the valleys fresh air, the caves houses. [...] We are not bothered by the fear of losing our honour, nor are we disturbed by the ambition to increase it. We cherish these huts and camps of ours as if they were gilded roofs and sumptuous palaces. [...] We have what we want, for we are content

images that warn us against any literal interpretation of the scenes and characters described in the text.[36] The contrast between the real world and the world of fiction engenders a sense of disharmony and bafflement in the reader. How should we consider the 'Gypsies'? Angels or demons? The association of highly discordant 'Gypsy' images and features creates a striking contrast and takes on the aspect of a parody, a '*jeu littéraire*', as Léblon points out: that of '*gitanisme*'.[37] We are then bound to acknowledge this textual inconsistency as a device through which the author casts an ironic gaze upon his own society.

The parody of the writer is not directed against the 'Gypsies', who act as a mere counterweight to the moral corruption of the main society, but against the 'civilized' world, which is opposed to the uncorrupted, unsophisticated life of this loathed minority. According to the common view, the 'Gypsies' are a 'criminal people'. Yet if we try to read between the lines (as the use of the verb *parece* in the opening passage may suggest), we will be able to recognize that the natural state symbolized by the 'Gypsies' is in reality the most genuine and authentic.[38] What is more, as the paradoxical construction of the text seems to suggest, we will also note that nature itself displays an ambivalent connotation. The Christian Humanist vision followed by Cervantes affirms that man is good by nature, as he was created in the likeness of

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with what we have'. From M. de Cervantes, *Novelas ejemplares*, pp. 101-102; trans. by C. A. Jones.

[36] According to Cervantes, Gypsy customs seem to have also a 'dark side': although the 'Gypsies' observe chastity and fidelity, cases of incest are fairly frequent in their society, and they punish women's adultery with death. Moreover, among them a young groom is allowed to abandon his wife because of her age, and 'age is as much a reason for divorce as death'. It is in opposition to such customs that Preciosa affirms her right to be respected and free: 'estos señores bien pueden entregarte mi cuerpo', she says to Andrés, 'pero no mi alma, que es libre y nació libre, y ha da ser libre en tanto que yo quisiere' ('these gentlemen may indeed hand over my body to you, but not my soul, which is free, and was born free, and will be free as long as I wish'. From M. de Cervantes, *Novelas ejemplares*, p. 103; trans. by C. A. Jones.

[37] See Bernard Léblon, *Les Gitans dans la littérature espagnole* (Toulouse: University of Toulouse-Le Mirail, 1982), p. 203.

[38] See the use of the verb *parece* in the opening passage of the *novela*.

God. From this standpoint, passions and instincts should not be aprioristically condemned and suppressed, as they are part of man's nature. 'Gypsies'' 'barbarous and shameless licence' is the clear confirmation that passions and instincts, though not a priori deplorable, cannot be pursued without restraint, but they should be always governed by reason (which ultimately constitutes the authentic nature of man).

It is then in the light of an ethical debate that we should consider the role played by 'Gypsy' characters within the *novela*. Once we reach the end of the story, we cannot help wondering: if the representation of the *Gitanilla* is subordinated to an ideological purpose and is ultimately directed at non-'Gypsies', what has become of the 'Gypsy' image? Once more, it has been sacrificed for the sake of literary invention and is still confined to the category of folklore. This interpretation is confirmed by a final *coup de théâtre*, when the disharmony that runs through the *novela* is dissolved through the uncovering of the real identity of the main character: Preciosa, who married her non-'Gypsy' lover, in fact, is not a 'Gypsy' at all. Despite its sympathetic tone, Cervantes's representation does not substantially undermine the position of 'Gypsies' in real life. A marriage between a 'Gypsy' and a non-'Gypsy' is still regarded as highly improbable. Cervantes' *gitanos* may function as the vehicle for an ethical debate, but this does not change the fact that the world of the 'Gypsies' and that of the Gağe remain ultimately incompatible.

(ii.ii) Tom Jones and the 'Gypsies'

In Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* the main character, having lost his way during a stormy winter's night, finds shelter in an isolated barn from which comes 'a confused sound of human voices; of singing, laughing, and hallowing, together with a strange noise that seemed to proceed from some instrument' and which 'might very well be called music bewitched' (p. 664). Partridge, Tom's companion, is convinced that the people assembled in that barn are not just 'merry-making people', but some kind of witches, or, even worse, some evil spirits – who on earth could be merry at that time of the night, in a remote place, in such a stormy weather? But Tom is determined to enter. And there they are: not hobgoblins, ghosts or sorcerers, but 'no other than a company of Egyptians, or, as they are vulgarly called, 'Gypsies', and they were now celebrating the wedding of one of their society' (p. 666). Such a joyful assembly, although completely absorbed in the atmosphere of extreme mirth and excitement of the dance and the banquet is by no means an anarchic horde of savages. Their happiness is not devoid of a sense of *countenance*, *order* and *decorum*, and it could not be otherwise, points out the narrating voice, as they are 'subject to a formal government and laws of their own, and all pay obedience to one great magistrate, whom they call their king' (p. 667). The chapter continues with a description of the political institutions of the 'Gypsies', depicted as ruled by a sort of 'enlightened monarch'. The 'king of the Gypsies' is described as a 'venerable person', whose authority was not marked out by riches and external signs of power, but 'was very little distinguished in dress from his subjects'. In his broken English, the 'Gypsy' majesty introduces his guest to his people, a community governed by the laws of love and mutual respect.

> Me have honour, as me say, to be deir king, and no monarch can do boast of more dutiful subject, ne no more affectionate. How far me deserve deir good-will, me no say; but dis me can say, dat me never design anyting but to do dem good. [...] Dey love and honour me darefore, because me do love and take care of dem; dat is all, me know no oder reason.[39]

Order and decorum do not originate from any coercion exerted by an institutional power, but are the outcome of the natural disposition of these people, spontaneously prone to a sense of order and justice. Once again, the 'Gypsies' are quoted as examples of an uncorrupted human nature, as representatives of a golden age that is irremediably lost to the rest of humankind. But Fielding's portrayal of the 'Gypsies' is not so 'idyllic'. The narrator does not celebrate the 'Gypsy' government as an ideal regime to be imitated. Absolute monarchy, he recalls, was really beneficial during the reigns of five good emperors, that is, Nerva, Trajan, Adrian and the two Antonini:

> this was the true era of the golden age, and the only golden age which ever had any existence, unless in the warm imaginations of the poets, from the expulsion from Eden down to this day.[40]

The goodness of an absolute monarchy relies on the wisdom and the moral attributes of the sovereign; without a monarch endowed with the three qualities of moderation, wisdom and goodness, absolute power is destined to degenerate into a ruinous tyranny, as the history of mankind has eloquently shown. In fact, 'mankind in general desire [sic] power only to do harm, and, when they obtain it, use it for no other purpose' (p. 672).

However admirable the example of the 'Gypsies' might appear, the narrator insists on the fact that their condition of extreme happiness finds its origin not in

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[39] H. Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones: A Foundling*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 668.
[40] Fielding, The History of Tom Jones, p. 672.

their form of government, but in the complete lack of 'false honour'[41] among them, and in the use of shame as the worst of punishments. Earlier in the chapter, the narrator had warned the reader that 'we are going to take a voyage into fairy-land, and introduce a set of beings into our history, which scarce any one was ever childish enough to believe, though many have been foolish enough to spend their time in writing and reading their adventure' (p. 666). This passage reveals a subtle rhetorical device lying at the heart of Fielding's narration, as Folkenflink emphasizes: '[Fielding] likes to keep his audience aware of the artifice of his works partly because he wishes it to recognize that what he presents is not reality as such'.[42] As far as the 'Gypsy' characters are concerned, their depiction is not realistic at all, but merely instrumental, that is, finalized to the aims of a political allegory. The 'king' of the 'Gypsies', exactly like the old man of the *Gitanilla*,[43] does not belong to any real community. He, as well as all the other 'Gypsy' characters, is only the emblem of a generic 'primitive state', the positive pole of a rhetorical opposition between the dominant society, with its vices and conventions, and a utopian, edenic condition forever lost. The criticism towards the institutions governing the civilized world is meant to attack some features of the current social system in order to improve it, not to eradicate or dismantle it. To this aim, the example of 'Gypsies' social organization serves as an ideal term of comparison, but is totally subordinate to the domain of the author's allegory. In other words, the 'Gypsy' characters act as a mere 'pretext' for a critical discourse formulated *by* the dominant society *about itself*. As we will see in Chapters 4 and 5, it is chiefly against this kind of ideological

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[41] On the 'Gypsies'' lack of interest in achieving honour and material prestige, see also Cervantes' *Gitanilla*, p. 102.
[42] Robert Folkenflink, 'Tom Jones, the 'Gypsies', and the Masquerade', *UTQ*, 3 (Spring 1975), 232.
[43] See also the image of the old 'Gypsy' man in Pushkin's 'Gypsies'.

manipulation that the Roma raise their call for a radical change in the Gağe's perception of the 'Gypsies'.

(iii) The magic of 'Gypsies'

> Ki shan i Romany / Adoi san' i chov'hani. Wherever 'Gypsies' go, / There the witches are, we know.
>
> Charles G. Leland, *Gypsy Sorcery and fortune telling*, 1891.

The association of 'Gypsies' with magic is undoubtedly one of the most deeply rooted in the imagination of the non-'Gypsies'. Since their first appearance among sedentary populations, the general disfavour surrounding 'Gypsies'' nomadic way of life was likely to result in witchcraft allegations. As shown in the first chapter, such allegations functioned as powerful strategies of social control and determined their inclusion in the ranks of sorcerers, witches and deviants, rebels and trouble-makers. 'Gypsies'' itinerancy was also frequently connected with some kind of supernatural entities and mysterious events which had occurred in a distant, obscure past. They were thought to be carrying the weight of a terrible curse, to be the descendants of biblical figures, and consequently regarded as the phenomenic materialization of a reality forever lost in the mists of time. As a result of these beliefs, 'Gypsies' were rarely seen as a people immersed in the historical present. Rather, they were looked at as relics of a vanished humanity, the living remnants of a separate dimension, remote from the present both in terms of space and time. It was this temporal and spatial displacement that laid the basis for the unrealistic images and features

projected in the course of time onto this enigmatic people. Atypical in their outward features and bizarre in their habits and occupations, 'Gypsies' gradually came to epitomize, in the 'collective conscience', the source of all the arcane, occult phenomena falling outside the domain of the ordinary. While in the first chapter we have analysed the consequences of this association in terms of the brutal policies adopted against 'Gypsies', here we are concerned with some of the innumerable literary images which stemmed from the magic aura surrounding 'Gypsies'' lifestyle and customs.

What is the magic fascination surrounding the image of the 'Gypsy' in the eyes of non-'Gypsy' authors? It is almost impossible to give a precise answer to this question. For certain, the magic of the fictional 'Gypsy' may not be easily identified with some specific features, although some physical and material traits have been frequently associated with the belief in some special powers. The magnetic and piercing look of the 'Gypsy' male character, his deep voice, his agile limbs, the dark eyes and the sensual movements of the female 'Gypsy' seem to exert a mysterious, irresistible attraction on the non-'Gypsies' and may lead to disastrous events.

The 'magic characterization' of the 'Gypsy' within the body of non-'Gypsy' literature is so wide and pervasive that the mere attempt to investigate here its endless ramifications would represent an impossible, fruitless undertaking. However, a recurrent pattern that can be easily deduced from these representations consists in using the 'Gypsy' as the repository of some exceptional qualities, ranging from some arcane connection with the devil to a number of occult powers. On the one hand, the 'Gypsies' seem to be the guardians of a secret world, the only creatures to have right of access to a mysterious, alternative dimension. The 'Gypsy' characters presented in this section – especially male ones – appear to dwell on the

threshold between truth and illusion. As for 'Gypsy' female characters, they are represented as having divining faculties, as experts in the magic arts. They are frequently depicted as exotic creatures with a diabolic ability to bewitch non-'Gypsy' males, who cannot help falling madly in love with them against their will. In the next part I will focus in particular on the stereotype of the '*femme fatale*', which emerged in nineteenth-century European literature and greatly contributed to shape the imagery of the Gağe about 'Gypsy' women.

(iii.i) The magic of 'Gypsy' women

The role played by 'Gypsy' female characters in works by non-'Gypsy' artists appears to follow a recurrent pattern. In many works, the 'Gypsy' is at the centre of some intricate plot, often entailing child stealing, the use of magic or various forms of trickery. 'Gypsies' are here perceived as synonymous with ruse, deception and double-dealing: they are ambiguous, mischievous characters by definition. Female figures in particular are portrayed as malicious and treacherous.[44] In addition to hatching evil plots and harbouring hostile feelings against non-'Gypsies', they are also employed to give the narration a magic connotation. This is particularly evident in literary works by nineteenth-century authors, where the presence of 'Gypsy' female characters is generally surrounded by a magnetic aura.

The appearance of the 'Gypsy' character on the scene tends to provoke feelings of admiration, surprise and amazement. Such is the appearance of Carmen at the

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[44] Cf. the role of the 'Gypsy' woman in Giancarli's *Zingana*, Cervantes' *Novelas*, Shakespeare's *Othello*, Verdi's *Trovatore* and so forth.

beginning of the homonimous short story by Prosper Mérimée:

> J'étais donc le nez sur ma chaîne, quand j'entends des bourgeois qui disaient: Voilà la gitanilla! Je levai les yeux, et je la vis. C'était un vendredi, et je ne l'oublierai jamais.[45]

In Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris*, Esmeralda appears as a supernatural creature, a dazzlingly beautiful 'vision':

> Dans un vaste espace laissé libre entre la foule et le feu, une jeune fille dansait. [...] Elle n'était pas grande, mais elle le semblait, tant sa fine taille s'élançiat hardiment. Elle était brune, mais on devinait que le jour sa peau devait avoir ce beau reflet doré des Andalouses et des Romaines. [...] Ses cheveux noirs, ses yeux de flamme, c'était une surnaturelle créature.[46]

Everybody seems completely absorbed in the contemplation of the 'Gypsy' girl – '*Autour d'elle tous les regards étaient fixes, toutes les bouches ouvertes*' (around her, all eyes were fixed and all mouths agape; p. 63) – as if under a magic spell. Preciosa seems to have an analogous effect on her audience:

> El aseo de Preciosa era tal, que poco a poco fue enamorando los ojos de cuantos la miraban. De entre el son del tamborín y castañetas y fuga del baile salío un rumor que encarecía la belleza y donaire de la gitanilla, y corrían los muchachos a verla, y los hombres a mirarla.[47]

This way of looking at 'Gypsies' was quite widespread in nineteenth-century European literature and contributed to establish Romani art as a recurrent literary trope. References to 'Gypsy' musical talent may be found in a wide range of authors, such as Cervantes, Dostoevsky, Hugo, Tolstoy, Garcia Lorca and many

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[45] 'So there I was engrossed in my chain when I heard some townsfolk saying: "Here comes the gitanilla." I raised my head, and saw her. It was a Friday; I'll never forget it'. P. Mérimée, *Carmen at autres nouvelles* (London: Harrap, 1962), p. 26; trans. by Nicholas Jotcham.

[46] 'In a huge space left free between the crowd and the fire, a young girl was dancing. [...] She was not tall, but so boldly erect was her slim figure that she looked it. She was dark, but you could tell that in the daylight her skin must have had that lovely golden sheen of Roman or Andalusian women. [...] Her black hair, her fiery eyes, she was indeed a supernatural creature'. V. Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), pp. 62-63; trans. by J. Sturrock.

[47] 'Preciosa was so attractive that as time went on she won the hearts of everyone who clapped eyes on her. Amid the sound of tambourines and the castanets, and the flurry of the dance, praises of the beauty and grace of the little gipsy girl brought the lads running to see her and the men to gaze at her'. M. de Cervantes, *Novelas Ejemplares* (Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, 1980), p.64; trans. by C. A. Jones.

others.[48] This is how Hugo describes the singing talent of the young *bohémienne*: '*C'était indéfinissable et charmant; quelque chose de pur, de sonore, d'aérien, d'ailé*'; '*elle semblait chanter, comme l'oiseau, par sérénité et par insouciance*'.[49] But besides the vague atmosphere of enchantment created by their talent as dancers, 'Gypsy' girls seem to excite rather insane passions among the non-'Gypsies'. In *Notre-Dame de Paris*, Frollo (a priest and alchemist) is devastated by his passion for Esmeralda. The features of this love are unmistakenly described by the victim himself as the result of a magic spell with terrible consequences:

> Oh! quelle désertion de toute vertu! quel abandon désespéré de moi-même! Docteur, je bafoue la science; gentilhomme, je déchire mon nom; prête, je fais du missel un oreiller de luxure, je crache au visage de mon Dieu! tout cela pour toi, enchanteresse! pour être plus digne de ton enfer![50]

Unable to govern his desire, the male character seems indeed to be possessed by a demon. Similarly, in Mérimée's *Carmen* Don José cannot help falling in love despite himself: '*J'était fou,* [...] *J'était comme un homme ivre*' (I was crazy, I was like a drunken man; p. 32). Carmen, for her part, displays an astonishing awareness of her power over her lover. The intentional nature of Carmen's seductive behaviour is essential to understand the textual functions performed by 'Gypsy' female characters. There is a great deal of audacity in Carmen's beauty and she seems to exploit her sexuality as a sort of weapon, a challenge to the male's capacity to impose his will upon her. Like Pushkin's Zemfira, she prefers to die rather than to

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[48] On the theme of Gypsy art and music within the body of European literature, see Djuric's article 'Rom e Sinti nella letteratura', in *Lacio Drom* 3-4 (1993), pp. 18-32.

[49] 'It was both enchanting and indefiniable: something pure, resonant, aerial and winged, so to speak; [...] she seemed to sing like a bird, out of serenity and a light heart'. From V. Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, p. 86; trans. by J. Sturrock.

[50] 'I have abandoned all virtue, have abandoned myself in despair! I am a doctor but I sneer at learning, a gentleman but I dishonour my name, a priest, but I have made myself a pillow of debauchery, I spit in the face of my God! All this for you, you enchantress! To be worthier of your hell!' V. Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, p. 468; trans. by J. Sturrock.

give up her freedom: '*Tu veux me tuer, je le vois bien, dit-elle; c'est écrit, mais tu ne me feras pas céder* [...] *Carmen sera toujours libre. Calli elle est née, calli elle mourra*'.[51] This attitude of mockery and defiance contrasts with that of non-'Gypsy' women. In Bizet's *Carmen*, for example, we are presented with an opposition between the shy, innocent Micaëla and the insolent, malicious 'Gypsy', underlined by the contrast between the former's fair beauty and the dark beauty of the 'Gypsy'. The appearance of Micaëla, a pretty, shy creature with tresses of fair hair, is very different from the bold attitude of Carmen, as we read in the *libretto*.[52]

The emotions aroused by 'Gypsy' women represent the negative term of the manichean opposition between good and evil, life and death. Such passions are always extreme, dangerous or even lethal; they defy any rational order and may lead to a man's damnation and to his social death, that is, his exclusion from civil society.[53] What lesson can the reader learn from the tragic ending of a non-'Gypsy''s love for a 'Gypsy' woman? This negative finale could be interpreted in moral terms, as the consequence of an infringement of well-established rules and conventions. On the other hand, beneath the surface of this moral condemnation, we may detect a deeper message. Passions involving 'Gypsies' are not merely 'devilish': they are also highly 'anti-structural': their violent and destructive nature is in symbolic opposition to more 'constructive' forms of love – i.e. marital love – which are

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[51] 'You want to kill me, I can see that – she said – it is written, but you will never make me submit. Carmen will always be free. *Calli* she was born, *Calli* she will die'. P. Mérimée, *Carmen at autres nouvelles* (London: Harrap, 1962), pp. 67-68; my translation.

[52] '*Depuis quelques minutes Micaëla est entrée. Jupe bleue, nattes tombant sur les épaules, hésitante, embarrassée, elle regarde les soldats avance, recule, etc. Moralès aux soldats*: 'Regardez donc cette petite / qui semble vouloir nous parler... / Voyez! Voyez!... elle tourne... elle hésite...' (*Carmen. Opéra en trois actes par Henri Meilhac et Ludovic Halévy tiré de la nouvelle de Prosper Mérimée. Musique de Georges Bizet.* Quoted in *OperaGlass*. 17 Oct. 2002. 12 Oct. 2003. <http://opera.stanford.edu/Bizet/Carmen/libretto.html>).

[53] For love of Carmen, Don José becomes a bandit and kills her beloved, as Frollo kills Esmeralda and Aleko Zemfira.

officially sanctioned and recognized by the majority society.

A threatening and anti-structural character by definition, the female 'Gypsy' is the target of ambivalent feelings of attraction and revulsion. She is the object of an immoderate desire, which stems from her own lack of restraint and morality; she represents a breach in the hegemonic social and moral structures. In this sense, she epitomizes the condition of her ethnic group, perceived as marginal and dangerous by the dominant society: the wild nature of 'Gypsy' lifestyle and customs is presented as a sign of their radical diversity and incompatibility with the dominant social system. The readers may indeed sympathize with these tragic heroines for their determination to defend their freedom at the cost of their life – a form of celebration of the free spirit of the 'Gypsy'. It is clear, however, that these characters' heroic status is not meant to exceed the limits of the text: it is the outcome of a textual fiction of the 'Gypsies' which is ultimately functional to the reassertion of their position as outsiders. From this point of view, the death of the 'Gypsy' character may be likened to a sort of expiatory rite which confirms the validity of the hegemonic order.

(iii.ii) Il Caldèras

Carlo Sgorlon's *Il Caldèras* (the coppersmith) is a novel set in northern Italy during the first half of the twentieth century. It narrates the story of Sindel, a young 'Gypsy' 'adopted' by old Vissalom after the enigmatic death of his family in a village of the Austro-Hungarian empire. The old 'Gypsy' brings up Sindel in a traditional way. He teaches the child the secrets of his profession, as well as a love

for 'Gypsy' music and, above all, he briefs Sindel on some mythical episodes of the history of 'Gypsy' people.

Sgorlon's depiction of these characters, which draws considerably on romantic stereotypes of 'Gypsies', is aimed primarily at highlighting some supposed 'Gypsy' innate propensities, such as their natural gift for music, or their prodigious skill in the craft of metal working. These abilities are not transmitted to them through a formal preliminary training, but seem to be already stored in their 'chromosomal inheritance', as natural talents inseparably linked with their 'Gypsy' origins. 'Gypsies' are 'spontaneously', gifted musicians[54] and refined craftsmen and they perform these arts at the highest degree of perfection just by following their instinct. It is at this level that the narrator situates the peculiar, 'magic' essence of 'Gypsiness': their being extraordinarily close to the world of nature, their mystic and 'shamanistic' tendency.[55]

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[54] The conviction that 'Gypsies' were born musicians was very common among many composers, such as for instance Franz Listz, Robert Schumann, Richard Wagner, Joseph Haydn, Ludwig van Beethoven, Johannes Brahms and Franz Schubert. The theme of 'Gypsy' music is to be found in the works of many authors, for instance Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Victor Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris* and Garcia Lorca's *Romancero Gitano*.

[55] Similarly, in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novel *Cien Años de Soledad* 'Gypsies' are described as a people of incomparable erudition and inventiveness. One of them in particular, Melquiades, stands out among all. Melquiades seems to belong to an obscure, mysterious dimension, lying beyond the human. There is something wild about this character, described as '*un gitano corpulento, de barba montaraz y manos de gorrión*' (a heavy 'Gypsy' with an untamed beard and sparrow hands) with '*áspero acento*' (harsh accent) and '*profunda voz de órgano*' (deep organ voice). His wild features do not merely bring Melquiades closer to the animal realm rather than to humankind, but they seem to locate him on the magic borderline between the real, visible world and a hidden, mysterious dimension from which he seems to draw his supernatural powers (see in this regard his close relationship with Mercury, the god of alchemy). He ages with incredible rapidity and seems to be able to rejuvenate at the same prodigious pace, defeating the laws of time and human mortality. The look of the 'Gypsy', his enigmatic activities, his cryptic language and writings, his mysterious arrivals and disappearances: everything about him is indicative of his connection with an esoteric, magic dimension located somewhere between the animal world, the human world and a subterranean reality inhabited by a multitude of invisible, powerful entities. As already seen, Melquiades is a prodigious creature, not an ordinary man. He seems to be above the laws that rule the life of humans, especially those of temporality. To him, the space-time dimension is a continuous, indistinct flow, a synchronous whole within which every event assumes an eternal resonance. The linear conception of time is here supplanted by the synchronic, cyclical dimension of the myth. The role played by the 'Gypsy' character in this novel is clearly connected with a conception of time that lies outside any conventional pattern: Melquiades has written the history of the Buendías (which coincides with the

The magic faculties of Sindel do not originate from the assimilation of any particular body of esoteric knowledge, but are here presented as manifestations of the inner nature of the 'Gypsies'. For no rational reasons, led only by a visceral, non-human call, Sindel likes to plunge into the recesses of the swamp, overwhelmed by a sense of unity with nature. In this context, remote from the 'civilized' world of the non-'Gypsies', the young 'Gypsy' is free to express his 'barbaric' side, in which his uniqueness resides. It is only there, away from the conventions of the sedentary society, that Sindel can enter a dimension to which nobody among the Gağe has right of access. On the one hand, we are presented with ordinary, sedentary people, who are used to dwelling in a plain, shallow dimension. Their experiences of time and space are confined to visible reality, immediately perceptible to the human eye, and their communication skills are limited and conventional. On the other hand, there is the 'Gypsy', who seems to be in communication with the 'spirit of the land', the 'spirit of the water', of plants and animals, that is, with the supernatural entity that is at the origin of every thing created: *Devel* (God). In this novel the 'Gypsies' are immersed in the perpetual flow that animates visible reality as well as the invisible one. They are 'special' creatures enjoying a privileged relationship with the laws of nature, and also with the

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novel itself) in such a way that one hundred years coexist in one instant. The part played by the *gitano* in the literary creation of a mythical time resembles the more general Western use of so-called 'primitive' peoples as a sort of 'temporal displacement' which signifies their 'Otherness' and confirms their radical diversity from the rest (on the temporal displacement of the 'Other' see in particular J. Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983) and K. Trumpener, 'The Time of the 'Gypsies'.

laws of human life.[56] In this novel the 'Gypsies' die exactly like all the others. Nevertheless, they seem to somehow escape the conventional laws of temporality. In spite of his young age, Sindel is already extraordinarily old. Hundreds of generations of 'Gypsies' live through him: he is the outcome of a millenary tradition. It is from this tradition that Sindel draws, instinctively, his skills and abilities. It is by virtue of his permanent link with the spirits of his ancestors that he, a lonely orphan, is never alone on this earth. And yet, he is destined to remain young forever, because 'Gypsies' are considered to be the youth of humankind.

The reason why 'Gypsy' characters have been constantly placed outside history is related to the specific features of the Western construction of the 'Gypsies'. Since their first appearance, 'Gypsies' have been perceived mainly in negative terms,[57] as a people still immersed in a primitive condition, with no attachment to a territorial state and no recognizable social organization. This negative perception also includes the conviction that the 'Gypsies' are a people 'without history'. A linear, cumulative conception of time seems incompatible with these savage, timeless wanderers and the lack of knowledge about the features of their oral memory led to the idea that the 'Gypsies' have no history at all. This exclusion from history is instrumental to the common claim that 'Gypsies' will never change, that their criminal 'inclination' is 'in their blood' and cannot be redeemed. Through this form of temporal displacement, their difference from the majority population is *fixed* and permanently associated with their cultural features.

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[56] See the 'Gypsies' in *Cien Años the Soledad*, who, thanks to the exceptional level of scientific erudition achieved, reach the condition of immortality. See also the amazing nonchalance displayed by Melquiades (the main 'Gypsy' character in this novel) in crossing the threshold between life and death.

[57] See Chapter 1.i.i.

It is particularly interesting to note that, among the skills 'acquired' by Sindel, there is also that of literacy. The young 'Gypsy', who has a fairly inquisitive mind, is not satisfied with the gnomic, generic sentences uttered by Vissalom in reply to his pressing inquiries about his people. One day he sets out to search for a book about the history of the 'Gypsy' people. Quite significantly, this search requires that the 'Gypsy' should leave his people and go among the Gağe, where he feels confused and vulnerable. The Gağe, generally feared and kept at a distance, are regarded as the holders of some crucial information concerning the 'Gypsies'. Unfortunately, as Sindel soon realizes, they know nothing about his people and their past. He is told that the history of the 'Gypsies' has never been recorded:

> Una storia degli zingari non si trovava, nessuno di loro ne aveva mai vista una, nessun cliente l'aveva mai chiesta, era probabile che non fosse mai stata scritta.[58]

The crucial question raised by this character is: why did the Gağe refuse to 'narrate' the 'Gypsies' and their past? The history of his people has not been recorded by written instruments because it is a *living* history, a sort of eternal present wholly enacted in the everyday lives of the 'Gypsies'. It is at this level that the author situates the magic of 'Gypsies': in their attitude towards the world, in their outlook on life, which is instinctive, rather than analytical. To the 'Gypsies', life appears in the form of a continuous, uninterrupted flow.[59] Everything created, whether located in the dimension of humanity or animality, is animated by this flow

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[58] A history of the 'Gypsies' was nowhere to be found, nobody had ever seen one, nobody among their clients had never asked for one, such a history probably had never been written. From C. Sgorlon, *Il Caldèras* (Milan: Mondadori, 1989), p. 115.

[59] As in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Cien Años the Soledad*, in Sgorlon's novel 'Gypsy' characters are repeatedly associated with images of fluidity. These images are closely connected with the depiction of the 'Gypsy' as a barbaric, primitive creature. In primitive ontology, as illustrated by Mircea Eliade, space and time are perceived as a *continuum*, to the primitive mentality, 'there is an implicit abolition of profane time, of duration, of 'history' (Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. by Willard R. Trask, Pantheon Books).

that does not acknowledge limits of time or space.[60] But are all 'Gypsies' invariably 'locked' in this cast of mind? The case of Sindel is particularly significant here. Contrary to the other members of his group, he is determined to trace back the events that brought his people among the Gağe. He therefore enters the 'spirit of history' and develops a critical approach towards the world around him. Such attitude seems to be connected with Sindel's literacy skills, whose development enables him to reach the very heart of Gağe's civilization: the written word. Surprisingly, Sindel's intellectual quest is destined to uncover a void, a missing link within the historical knowledge of the dominant group. For a Rom, the reason for this void is clear: the Gağe did not worry about narrating the history of the Romani people because they have a priori considered the 'Gypsies' as a people without history:

> nessuno aveva mai compilato una storia degli zingari perché gli scrittori avevano sempre ritenuto che essi non possedessero una storia, *così come* non avevano una patria, perché erano un popolo bambino e fuori dal tempo.[61]

This passage helps to highlight the primal source of the distorted representations produced by the Gağe about the 'Gypsies'. Paradoxically, the core of the innumerable works inspired by the 'Gypsies' is represented by an *absence*. In other words, the success of the 'Gypsies' as fictional characters is based on their *eradication* as historical subjects. Another point worth mentioning is that this manipulation of the 'Gypsy' image is not confined to the literary realm, but is likely to have serious repercussions on the social plane, as it shapes the perception of the Gağe and may also affect the self-representations of the Roma. In this regard, it may

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[60] Images of fluidity are also to be found in the texts by Romani poets, whether connected with the natural world or, more frequently, as instances of a textual strategy imitating vocal melody and oral narration.

[61] Nobody had ever written a history of the 'Gypsies' because it was thought that they had no history, as they had no homeland, because they were an infant people situated outside time. From *Il Caldèras*, p. 115; my translation and my emphasis.

be useful to recall Sindel's reaction to the fruitless search for the history of the 'Gypsies':

> ciò che aveva sempre pensato ora si rassodava in una convinzione precisa, che era malinconica e lo faceva sentire *come fosse nessuno.*[62]

The Gağe's hetero-representations and the Roma self-representations, as we will see in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5, are strictly interconnected. In fact, the process of identity-building is a matter of reciprocal influence and dialogic interaction. The case of the 'Gypsies' demonstrates how this potentially enriching, dynamic process of interchange can be effectively inhibited through a mechanism of persistent removal of ethnic identity from the social context and its 'camouflage', its purposeful displacement onto a fictional plane.

(iv) Picturesque subjects

To the eyes of many European authors, the life of the 'Gypsies' seemed to epitomize the very essence of freedom and proud independence from the conventions of a non-lyric and increasingly dehumanizing society.[63] Unparalled samples of a wild, untamed condition irretrievable by the civilized man, 'Gypsies' were increasingly

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[62] What he had always thought became a firm conviction, which was bitter and made him feel as a nobody. From *Il Caldèras*, p. 115; my translation and my emphasis.

[63] See especially the Romantic period, an era that granted the 'Gypsy' with a sort of 'literary dignity' and saw the emergence of some of the most influential among the innumerable artistic representations inspired by the 'Gypsies'. See for instance Johann Wolfang Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795) and Achim von Arnim's *Isabella von Aegypten* (1812); William Wordsworth's poems 'Beggars' (1802) and 'Gipsies' (1807); Béranger's song *Les Bohémiens*; Victor Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris* (1831) and Prosper Mérimée *Carmen* (1847); Flaubert, Nerval, Zola; George Sand, *La filleule* (1853); Charles Baudelaire, 'Les Bohémiens en voyage' (1852), 'Les Vocations' (1862), 'La fin de Don Juan' (1853); Théophile Gautier, *Voyage en Espagne* (1845); Garcia Lorca's *Romancero Gitano*; Jane Austen's *Emma* (1816); Robert Browning, *The Flight of the Duchess* (1845); Mattew Arnold's 'The Scholar-Gypsy' (1853); Pushkin, *Tsygani* (1824); Nikolai Leskov, *The Enchanted Wanderer* (1873) and Leo Tolstoy, *The live corpse* (1900).

regarded as emblems of freedom, gaiety and unrestrained sensuality. By virtue of these 'intrinsic' qualities, 'Gypsy' characters became a recurrent presence in the field of European literature. To provide here a detailed account of such a pervasive presence would be scarcely feasible, as this task extends well beyond the limits and aims of the present study. For this reason, I will simply focus on a critical aspect of the extraordinary popularity enjoyed by 'Gypsy' characters: the progressive fixation of their features into the dimension of the stereotype. Considered as inherently intolerant of the suffocating conventions of sedentary society, 'Gypsies' are constantly depicted as 'primitive', visceral subjects, driven by nothing but the laws of their will. On the other side of this 'Byronic nature' of the 'Gypsies', we can frequently find an 'idyllic', Rousseauian interpretation of their society and customs: for a large number of authors, life in a 'Gypsy' camp was representative of an uncorrupted world untouched by the cruelty governing the rest of humanity. In any case, after endless rehearsals and manipulations, the 'romantic Gypsy' was due to become a sort of 'frozen image', flawless but highly artificial, likely to express fictitious emotions, more than proper passions. The exotic, wild fascination of the 'Gypsy' in general and the exuberant, indomitable sensuality of the 'Gypsy' woman in particular became commonplace liberally exploited by poets, playwrights, novelists and musicians. As the fame of the fictional 'Gypsies' was growing across the body of European art and literature, the real 'Gypsies' seemed gradually to fade away. It was a typical manifestation of the 'cognitive divergence'[64] that is largely accountable for the creation of an unrealistic image of this people. As a result of this alteration, the only 'Gypsies' to be considered 'socially

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[64] See Chapter 1.v.

acceptable' were the fictional ones.

(iv.i) The Picturesque aesthetics of Gypsiness

Besides being at the centre of an intense political and philosophical theorization (see Chapter 2.ii), 'Gypsies'' fascinating closeness to nature is inextricably interwoven with a particular form of aesthetic perception of nature and wildness that we may define as the aesthetic of the 'Picturesque'.[65]

As Copley and Garside warn us, that of the picturesque is an indeterminate concept, a 'notoriously difficult category to define', usually interpreted as a blend of aesthetic qualities such as 'roughness', 'wilderness' and 'coarseness'.[66]

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[65] The taste for the Picturesque enjoyed a high degree of popularity during the second half of the eighteenth century, a popularity that continued, though to a lesser extent, well into the nineteenth century. The original significance of the term (derived from the Italian pittoresco and the French pittoresque), was related to a sort of 'pictorial quality' of some objects, which made them look 'like a picture', and therefore particularly suited to be transposed on the artist's canvas. The idea of the Picturesque deeply influenced the works of landscape painters, whose view of nature revealed a tendency to attribute to natural forms a symbolic significance. In broader terms, we may consider the concept of the Picturesque as referring to a more general phenomenon, that is, the fascination and the allure exerted by some natural phenomena on the human soul. From this point of view, the Picturesque is closely related to the idea of the sublime, which characterized the Romantic movement, although it is not completely coincident with it.

[66] See S. Copley and P. Garside, *Introduction*, in S. Copley and P. Garside (eds.), *The Politics of the Picturesque: Literature, Landscape, and Aesthetics since 1770* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp.1-3. Despite being so ill-defined, the Picturesque can be nevertheless distinguished from other 'more established' notions, such as those of beauty and ugliness. 'Beauty', according to Uvedal Price, arises principally from qualities such as 'smoothness' and 'gradual variation'. To further illustrate the dominant principles of the category of the beautiful, Price describes 'the most enchanting object the eye of a man can behold', that is, a charming womanly face: 'The eye-brows, and the eye-lashes, by their projecting shade over the transparent surface of the eye, and above all the hair, by its comparative roughness and its partial concealments, accompany and relieve the softness, clearness and smoothness of all the rest'. (Uvedale Price, *Essays on the Picturesque, as Compared with the Sublime and the Beautiful*, 3 vols (London: Mawman, 1810; repr. Westmead, Farnborough: Gregg International, 1971), I, pp. 104-105). Beauty is here described as related to 'smoothness' and 'softness', that is, qualities capable of transmitting feelings of composure and serenity, and to 'transparency' and 'clearness', which convey a sense of purity. Beauty is also connected with lightness of colour and fair complexion, with mildness and, more in general, with symmetry of proportions. On the contrary, Ugliness arises from the lack of form, from 'an unshapen lumpish appearance, which, perhaps, no one word exactly expresses'. Ugliness seems to be concerned with

The picturesque, being distinct from beauty and ugliness, seems to be associated with the idea of some kind of 'deviation' from the norm, the common sense of proportions and colour combination. This deviation is likely to catalyse the attention, being endowed with a 'marked character' that can powerfully activate and spur human emotions. By contrast, what is vapid and lacks any salient feature is considered aesthetically inert and insipid. To illustrate its conception of the picturesque, Price effectively recalls the image of a womanly face:

> Conceive the eyebrows more strongly marked; the hair rougher in its effect and quality; the complexion more dusky and 'Gypsy'-like; the skin of a coarser grain, with some moles in it; a degree of cast in the eyes, but so slight, as only to give archness and peculiarity of countenance.[67]

'Gypsy' features and complexion are here adduced as representative of the picturesque. They seem to epitomize this notion by virtue of some intrinsic correlation with wild nature:

> In our species, objects merely picturesque are to be found among the wandering tribes of 'Gypsies' and beggars; who, in all the qualities which give them that character, bear a close analogy to the wild forest and the worn-out cart-horse, and again to old mills, hovels, and *other inanimate objects of the same kind.*[68]

The picturesque is here nothing more than a conventional set of rules aimed at arranging and portraying objects in order to obtain a 'pictorial effect'. Through this approach, 'Gypsies' are degraded to the level of mere objects, made equal to a cart-horse, or an old mill. 'Gypsies' are here considered to be an integral part of a conventional landscape, confined to the realm of the inanimate and therefore

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the notion of shaplessness, of insipid monotony, absence of variation. With regard to colours, Price points out that, as transparency, as we have seen, is beautiful, so 'the want of transparency, or what may be termed muddiness, is the most general and efficient cause of ugliness' (U. Price, *Essays on the Picturesque*, I, p. 205.

[67] Price, *Essays*, I, 206.

[68] Price, *Essays*, I, 63, my emphasis.

deprived of any kind of real existence.[69] Such an approach, allegedly aimed at defining what is 'typically' 'Gypsy', is merely concerned with the domain of artistic invention, where 'Gypsy' figures are nothing but pictorial or poetic artifices whose only function is to elicit and gratify our aesthetic pleasure. At the roots of aesthetic reductionism of this sort, it is worth remarking, there is also an ethnic reductionism, according to which 'Gypsy' diversity is decontextualized and transposed from reality to the conceptual framework of an artistic invention.

However remote from the real thing, the picturesque 'Gypsies' still retain some of the qualities that earned them considerable literary fame (as well as a good degree of stereotipization) across the centuries: their 'intrinsic wildness' and especially their deviance from the conventional and the ordinary. Being considered a source of aesthetic pleasure does not sublimate the sense of strangeness produced by the vision of 'the wandering tribes of "Gypsies" and beggars' in the middle of a wild landscape. The 'naturalization' of the 'Gypsy' image is certainly connected to the idea of 'Gypsies' as 'primitives' and 'savages' still untouched by civilization, and it contributes to situate them, once again, outside the domain of humanity and civilized society.

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[69] The pictorial qualities of 'Gypsy' figures are amply testified by the iconographic flourishing of drawings, engravings and paintings in which they are depicted. A large number of painters of all epochs have received inspiration from 'Gypsy' subjects, and 'Gypsy' iconography has already established its favourite tropes, especially those of fortune-telling and 'Gypsies'' occupations and petty deceptions: to mention just a few, Caravaggio, Georges de la Tour, Valentino, Manet, Renoir, Van Gogh. See also the engravings by Jacques Callot (*Bohémiens en voyage*), author of a popular series of etchings representing various scenes of 'Gypsies' life.

(iv.ii) Pushkin's 'Tsygani'

The Russian poet Alexander Pushkin was fascinated by the life of the 'Gypsies'. His poem *Tsygani* (The Gypsies, 1824), considered 'the most mature and thoughtful of Pushkin's southern narrative poems',[70] presents the tragic story of Aleko, a young Russian who, having joined a tribe of 'Gypsies', adopts their nomadic life and their refusal of the conventions of the civilized society.

The poem begins with a meticulous, idyllic description of the 'Gypsy' camp, which was probably meant to reproduce what Pushkin had seen during his trips to Bessarabia. The opening passage, centred on the depiction of a band of 'Gypsies' camped amid the steppes, provides the reader with images of rare fascination. The fading luminescence of twilight, the tattered tents along the riverbank, the bark of dogs and neigh of horses: all these elements provide the scene with a picturesque aura, artfully refined by Pushkin's elegant versification.

> The Gypsies in a clamorous throng
> Wander round Bessarabia.
> Tonight above a river-bank
> They have spread their tattered tents.
> ...Between the wagon-wheels a fire
> Is burning, and the family sits
> Around it, cooking supper; horses
> Graze in the bare field; behind
> The tent a tame bear lies, unchained.[71]

In the poem 'Gypsies' are depicted as timid, peaceful men leading a frugal life in harmony with nature. They abhor the laws of civilization and, disapproving of the dangerous passions that dominated men in urban society, treasure their freedom

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[70] See Alexander Pushkin, *The Bronze Horseman: Selected Poems of Alexander Pushkin*, trans. by D. M. Thomas (London: Secker and Warburg, 1982), p. 267.
[71] The Bronze Horseman, p. 110.

above everything else.

Their camp-site is, like freedom, gay,
Peaceful their sleep beneath the heavens;
Between the wagon-wheels a fire
Is burning, and the family sits
Around it, cooking supper; ...
Everything's alive amid the steppes:
The peaceful labours of the family,
Ready to be off at dawn,
And women's songs, and children's shouts,
And the travelling anvil's clang.

Aleko, though born to a different life and different customs, throws away 'the chains and shackles of enlightenment' to follow Zemfira, the daughter of the chief. Despite his professed intentions, however, Aleko is far from being a 'natural man'. Civilization has impressed an indelible mark on him. He may have adopted a humble, noble lifestyle, he may have given up the pleasures and corruption of the city in the name of freedom, but when he discovers that Zemfira is unfaithful, his old passions are immediately rekindled. Jealousy, rage, thirst for revenge: these are the fateful passions that cause the tragedy. The old 'Gypsy''s attempts to dissuade him from his intentions of revenge are unsuccessful: in order to protect his rights, his honour, Aleko kills Zemfira's 'Gypsy' lover. To restore his wounded pride, he murders the woman of his life.

As a consequence of his murderous actions, Aleko breaches the 'Gypsies' natural law and determines his perpetual banishment from the tribe. We can easily acknowledge here – encouraged by the textual indications with which the author interspersed the poem – the bitter, desolate tone of the conclusive scene of the poem: the bloody passions of the civilized man end up contaminating even the untouched, idyllic world of the natural man. But despite this problematic, tragic core of Pushkin's poem – in which its originality resides – its 'Gypsy' characters can hardly be described as genuinely 'dramatic' and 'tragic'. Their features are too typified and

artificial (we could also say, symbolically charged) to be able to transmit the vibrant tension of human life and emotions. The 'Gypsy' characters do not have life of their own, they are somehow 'flattened' against the background; they become, in a sense, part of the setting. As such, they are nothing more than mere textual devices functional to the structural economy of the poem.

It is worth pointing out that Pushkin's depiction of the 'Gypsies' has greatly influenced later representations of the 'Gypsies' as the embodiment of freedom (see for example Mérimée's *Carmen*). As Lemon argues, Pushkin's 'Gypsies' 'represent the unpredictable forces of authentic desire – not an ordered liberty from rule (*svoboda*) but the free exercise of will and caprice, *voljia'* (Lemon 2000: 37). This idea of absolute freedom was forcefully represented by the passionate female 'Gypsy', which is a recurrent intertextual motif in European literature (as observed in 2.iii.i). In reality, such textual representations diverge dramatically from the condition of the 'Gypsies' as a real people. The behaviour of Zemfira in particular has very little in common with that of a Romani girl, which in reality is subjected to rather strict limitations (as we will see in Section 4.ii.iii). Yet, the idea that the freedom of the 'Gypsies' is a sort of inherent quality, something that 'runs in their blood', was doomed to enjoy a great diffusion among the Gağe. The popularity of such fictional representations, however, only matches the lack of empirical knowledge about the way of life and the traditions of the Romani people.[72]

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[72] On the Romani interpretation of the Romantic topos of the 'Gypsies' as 'free spirits', see Section 4.ii.i.

(iv.iii) Baudelaire's 'Bohémiens'

There is a substantial, deep affinity between the image of the 'Gypsies' and the condition of the Romantic poet, whose activity both presupposed and involved a certain degree of marginality – if not of resolute abhorrence of any restriction upon the ungovernable flights of poetic inspiration. Lyric creativity itself could be conceived as a 'flight' of the imagination that leaves behind the unbearable weight of the world, with its constrictions and obligations. The urban world in particular, with its ordered rhythms, its prosaic routine, its certainties and rules, is often looked at as a web of unbearable impositions, a menacing threat to intellectual freedom and to the poetry of life in general. Society in the industrial age became increasingly hostile and alien to the poet and his/her contemplative way of life, centred on the rhythms and the mysterious dynamics of his/her internal life.

In many respects, the condition of the artist is that of an 'outcast' by definition. The poet, blessed by the muse of poetry, is given the faculty to look into the unseen, to perceive the secret, intangible dimension from which his/her work derives inspiration and continuous nourishment. This is a fatal gift, a blessing and a curse at the same time. As for Cassandra in Greek mythology, the arcane voice of the poet is condemned to remain generally unheard and neglected. Perhaps it is not by coincidence that in one of the most memorable lyric depictions of the 'Gypsies', that of Baudelaire's *Bohémiens en voyage*,[73] they are defined as '*la tribu prophétique aux prunelles ardentes*' (that tribe of prophets with the burning eyes).

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[73] Other works by Baudelaire dealing with 'Gypsies' are the prose poem 'Les Vocations' (1862) and the unfinished play *La fin de Don Juan* (1853).

BOHÉMIENS EN VOYAGE

La tribu prophétique aux prunelles ardentes
Hier s'est mise en route, emportant ses petits
Sur son dos, ou livrant à leurs fiers appétits
Le trésor toujours près des mamelles pendantes.

Les hommes vont à pied sous leurs armes luisantes
Le long des chariots où les leurs sont blottis,
Promenant sur le ciel des yeux appesantis
Par le morne regret des chimères absentes.

Du fond de son réduit sablonneux, le grillon,
Les regardant passer, redouble sa chanson;
Cybèle, qui les aime, augumente ses verdures,
Fait couler le rocher et fleurir le désert
Devant ces voyageurs, pour lesquels est ouvert
L'empire familier des ténèbres futures.[74]

The *Bohémiens* move solemnly in a sort of biblical scenery, and their solemn procession bears remarkable resemblance to the Jewish Exodus. Their wanderings seem to have originated from the dawning of humankind, and to be destined to have no end. It is, in fact, a journey through time. But the time of the poem, it is clear from the initial lines, is far removed from the familiar, conventional notion of a linear succession of events. Such a chronological, sequential conception is here profoundly altered and redefined through the magic syncretism of the poetic creation. The result is a temporal dimension in which the future is inextricably interwoven with the past, and the present acquires almost a mythical resonance. In Baudelaire's poem, the notion of time and space are somehow suspended and their boundaries blurred and merged with one another. The role played by the 'Gypsy' characters in this context is precisely to embody this dimension of ambivalence and uncertainty.

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[74] WANDERING GYPSIES. The tribe of prophets with glowing eyes yesterday took to the road, carrying their little ones on their back, or offering, for their proud hunger, the inexhaustible treasure of their heavy breasts. / Bearing their glittering weapons aloft, the men stride alongside their caravans, where their folk huddle together, their eyes sweeping the sky, drowsy with mournful nostalgia for departed dreams. / From the shelter of his sandy nook, the cricket watching them go by redoubles his song; while for love of them Cybele puts forth more shoots of green, / makes the rocks gush water and the desert flower before these wanderers' steps, for whom unclose the familiar realms of shades to come.

Endowed with prophetic faculties (which explains their orientation towards the future), these figures seem to dwell in a remote, ancestral past and assume almost an archetypal connotation. They are presented as 'primitive', picturesque samples of a mythical condition of uncorrupted 'innocence' (a sort of Eden lost forever), which is revived only through the magic art of poetry. In addition, they are figures in perennial movement through time and space. The fundamental question concerns the poet's interpretation of the journey of the *Bohémiens*.

In these verses nomadism itself is essentially perceived as a lyric condition. In other words, the poet is interested in the *symbolic* meaning of travelling.[75] This is obviously an abstract, highly stylized idea of nomadism, which is reduced to a mere literary image. 'Gypsies'' nomadic way of life, discouraged and penalized in reality, enters the dimension of myth and becomes a primal source of lyric inspiration. The idea of travelling has always inspired writers and poets of any time and provenance. Sometimes travelling is used as a spatial metaphor, and other times as an allegoric representation of the inward journey of the author, i.e. as a symbol of his/her search for the meanings that lie beyond phenomenic reality. From this perspective, the use of images and metaphors inspired by 'Gypsy life' may be considered exclusively as a sort of literary expedient motivated by aesthetic and stylistic factors.

Once established as a familiar trope within European literature and popular imagery, the images of the fictional 'Gypsy' lost a clear meaning. They became progressively devoid of a significant correlation with ethical, philosophical and

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From C. Baudelaire, *The Complete Verse*, 2 vols, ed. and trans. by Francis Scarfe (London: Anvil, 1986), I, p. 72.

[75] The corrisponding image among Romani poets may be considered that of the Roma as 'sons of the winds' (see Section 4.ii.i).

ideological issues, and were subsumed under the generic label of exoticism. The implications of this process of fictionalization for the Roma are serious. Such exotic images (often criticized by Romani intellectuals and activists) are the prime source of a widespread view of 'Gypsies' which conflates fiction with reality and contributes to the displacement of the Romani identity. By arbitrarily decontextualizing and re-interpreting some components of 'Gypsy' culture, the Gağe have created their own version of the 'Gypsy', hosted by a large number of their literary works, as opposed to the despised, marginalized real-life 'Gypsies'. Needless to say, it was only the exotic version of the 'Gypsy', carefully shaped by Gağe authors, that was granted right of abode in the body of European culture. As for real-life 'Gypsies', they were doomed to remain excluded from every form of interaction and cultural interchange.

(v) <u>The aesthetic manipulation of the 'Gypsy' alterity</u>

The selection of images presented in this study epitomizes some of the most recurrent representations of the 'Gypsies' throughout the centuries. This multifarious inventory of images ranges from a depiction of 'Gypsies' as picturesque objects to the most symbolic, abstract interpretations of nomadism. Generally speaking, one could affirm that European authors have largely employed the image of the 'Gypsy' as a kind of textual device, to evoke a sense of 'symbolic levity' through their verses, or simply to sprinkle their texts with a touch of exoticism and bohemian allure. The salient features of this image, as we have seen, are closely connected with conceptual paradigms of great popularity within the body of European thought and literature. During the Middle Ages, it was mainly the symbolism of the colour black – together

with the idea of a close association with evil forces – that influenced the depiction of 'Gypsy' people. With the rise of the notion of wildness as a leading subject within philosophical, political and ethical debates, the 'Gypsies' were to be increasingly portrayed as representative of a 'natural state' of man, and variously regarded as examples to follow or, on the contrary, to be surpassed by the civilized man.[76] More recently, it was 'Gypsy' nomadism and their unconventional way of life to be exalted and idealized in order to forge an image of the utmost romanticism and exotic fascination.

The overwhelming profusion of images related to 'Gypsies', as already pointed out, diverges quite remarkably from the marginalization and the hostility towards Romani people, whose success and celebrity in the fictional world are inversely proportional to their oblivion and rejection in the real one. Whether we examine the role played by these various representations in the social or literary context of the time, however, it is essential to acknowledge their fictional, manipulated nature. Yet to recognize the fictional nature of such images does not necessarily mean to minimize their effects and repercussions on the social plane. As Ian Hancock has emphasized,

> The manipulation by societies in power of the identities of subordinate groups is achieved in many ways. One such way is through discriminatory legislation, [...] another is through media representation,

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[76] It is in opposition to an alleged 'state of Nature' that the very notion of civilization emerged (see Adam Kuper, *Culture. An Anthropologist's Account* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). As pointed out by Hayden White: 'In times of socio-cultural stress, when the need for positive self-definition asserts itself but no compelling criterion of self-identification appears, it is always possible to say something like: "I may not know the precise content of my own felt humanity, but I am most certainly not like that", and simply point to something in the landscape that is manifestly different from oneself. ... Similarly, in the past, when men were uncertain as to the precise quality of their sensed humanity, they appealed to the concept of wildness to designate an area of subhumanity that was characterized by everything they hoped they were not' (1978, 151-2).

> both factual and fictional. This last category, *the portrayal of 'Gypsies' in poetry, film, and novels, is the most effective in establishing such negative feelings because they are absorbed subliminally by children and adults.*[77]

The manipulation to which the author refers is carried out not only through the exploitation of negative stereotypes. Idealized portrayals of 'Gypsies' (especially those detected in works by Romantic authors) are as misleading as derogatory depictions. Fictional representations, whether negative or positive, can be seen as textual enactments of the same ethnic strategy: the incorporation of the 'Gypsy' image, often reduced to a mere collection of picturesque traits, into a 'more familiar' conceptual framework.[78] This form of 'domestication' of the 'Gypsy' alterity[79] – which could be defined as an 'aesthetics of Gypsiness' – has been achieved through a number of textual strategies. In particular, the literary representations analysed above reveal a tendency to *essentialize* the 'Gypsies' and *displace* them symbolically outside the domain of 'civilized' society.[80] To a certain extent, such representational strategies may be observed in most Western written *xenologies*.[81] In his *Orientalism*, for example, Said seems to refer to a similar process within Western textual depictions of the Orient. He regards Orientalism as

> a manner of regularized (or Orientalized) writing, vision, and study, dominated by imperatives, perspectives, and ideological biases ostensibly

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[77] I. Hancock, 'Duty and Beauty, Possession and Truth: "Lexical Impoverishment" as Control', in D. Tong (ed.), *Gypsies. An Interdisciplinary Reader* (New York: Garland, 1998), pp. 115-126 (p. 115).

[78] See the gitanismo, the Bohémianisme and the various manifestations of 'Gypsy magic' and the 'picturesque Gypsies'.

[79] From a certain point of view, this process of 'domestication' or, better, 'cultural translation' is unavoidable, being directly related to the manner in which humans construct their knowledge of what is different and remote from their experience. What is despicable and unacceptable, however, is the deliberate deployment of highly manipulated images to enforce policies of repression and discrimination.

[80] The symbolic displacement of the 'Gypsies' is particularly evident in the works in which they act as enigmatic characters lingering on the borderline between the 'real' world – that is, the world of the Gağe – and a hidden, 'unstructured' dimension of wildness.

[81] The term 'xenology' (from the Greek *xenos*, foreigner) has been introduced by Remotti to define the 'representations concerning the Other'. See F. Remotti (ed.) *Le antropologie degli altri: Saggi di etno-antropologia* (Turin: Scriptorium, 1997), p. 34.

suited to the Orient.[82]

Said shows how Orientalized writing is based upon a structure which *schematizes* and *dichotomizes* humanity into a web of binary opposition. In these texts the reality of the Orient is completely overshadowed by the Western xenology. Written texts, Said argues, inevitably suppress and distort reality. They impose a monolithic, heavily biased structure onto the irreducible complexity of human life. Writing decontextualizes and objectifies living reality and may lead to a referential 'illusion' whereby textual representations act as a 'surrogate' of the real thing.

As in the case of 'Orientalist' writing, the texts examined in this chapter tend to fix and essentialize the features of the 'Gypsy', usually depicted as 'mysterious', 'wild' and 'exotic'. Moreover, they insist on the 'Gypsies'' difference and separateness from the majority and succeed in projecting the Romani identity at the margins of their socio-cultural system. Whether we consider depictions of the 'Gypsies' as monstrous characters or as romantic wanderers, they share a common condition: they all seem to linger on the fringes of the dominant society, either on a symbolic or on a social level. These characters are entirely confined to a textual space created *ad hoc* by the Gağe, which is, again, a space of exclusion.

The persistent negation of the Romani identity manifests itself in the monologic structure of Gağe's writing, in which the 'Gypsy' characters are utterly subordinated to a textual dimension and, more importantly, to the ideology of the author. In the next chapters I will show how Romani authors have been able to escape the *logic of difference* and *exclusion* which characterizes the 'fictional Gypsies'. As we will see, Romani literature is essentially aimed at challenging the Gağe's stereotypes and their underlying logic. The Roma perform this critique not by merely opposing the

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[82] E. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 202.

hetero-representations, but by partially 'recycling' some of the textual strategies and the images devised by the Gağe.[83] By doing so, they succeed in turning the essentialization and displacement of their identity to their advantage.

The Roma's re-interpretation of the 'Gypsy' has at least two important implications, which will be examined in detail in the second part of this thesis. On the one hand, this act of critical re-reading (and re-writing) enables Romani authors to challenge the 'Gypsy' image from within and to reveal its 'constructed', fictional nature. On the other hand, the re-invention of the Romani image through strategies of intertextual hybridity and literary bricolage helps them (and us) re-think the Roma/Gağe interaction in a non-binary fashion.

Until now, the Gağe's written representations concerning 'Gypsies' have been mainly used to negate and distort the cultural diversity of the Romani people. In contrast with these examples of monologic writing, Romani self-representations indicates a way of looking at the text as a site of negotiation of cultural meaning, rather than a means of appropriation and subordination of Otherness to the schemes of the dominant society.

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[83] As we will see, this process of textual bricolage concerns most of the images evoked in this chapter, especially the celebration of the 'Gypsy' way of life as righteous and uncorrupted in contrast with the corruption of the 'civilized' society, the privileged relation of the 'Gypsies' with nature (analysed in sections 2.ii and 2.iii), and the idea of the unbounded freedom of the 'Gypsy soul' (see section 2.iv).

3 THE RISE OF ROMANI LITERATURE

The previous chapter has been devoted to a discussion of some of the most popular images of the 'Gypsies' within the body of European literature. As already pointed out, the social impact of such images and their role in shaping highly stereotyped, distorted views of Romani culture among the sedentary population have been quite conspicuous. The innumerable versions of the 'fictional Gypsy' that have been unfolding throughout the centuries, far from being confined to a purely imaginary dimension, penetrated the popular imagination, and helped to trigger harsh policies of exclusion and persecution against Romani people.

Until now, these manipulated images have acted as a sort of distorting mirror, conveying and perpetuating a number of misleading representations of Romani culture and society. The present chapter aims at challenging some of the most persistent among these views, especially that of the 'primitive Gypsies', a people supposed to be non-literate and lacking all the main features and abilities regarded as the essential prerequisites of a 'civilised', advanced society. This belief is closely connected with a widespread conception of traditional societies as intrinsically 'static' and frozen in a kind of timeless condition, almost fossilized samples of a long-lost humanity. According to this conception, non-Western societies would be on the verge of an inevitable extinction: compared to Western societies, where everything is incredibly fast and progressive, these 'cold societies,' as Lévi-Strauss named them, seem to move 'at a lower pace'.[1] On their inside, the dynamics of

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[1] See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage*, and Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other*.

social change are thought to take place over an extended period of time, and they are seen as doomed to give ground to other, more 'advanced' societies.[2]

This view of traditional societies and cultures is clearly unsatisfactory. If we were to credit such a drastic belief, we would never be able to realistically account for the presence of the Roma within Western society. If they really were to be conceived as 'primitive' and 'doomed to extinction', this would have already entailed their automatic assimilation into the host societies. How did the Roma manage to resist the innumerable attempts of cultural assimilation to which they have been subjected? How did they organize and negotiate their centuries-old experience of contiguous, turbulent contact with the Gağe?

As Judith Okely pointed out in her study on Gypsies in Britain, 'it is often assumed that "culture contact" brings changes by a kind of contagion; the most technologically advanced economy and the dominant political group 'infecting' or rubbing off its culture onto the least technologically advanced and perhaps subordinate group.'[3] In fact, culture contact is a far more complex phenomenon, involving an intricate web of interrelations and reciprocal influences. The word 'contagion' is not particularly appropriate to designate this dynamic process, as it suggests the idea of an asymmetrical situation of cultural assimilation where the most 'advanced' society is invariably the prevailing one and the minority group is the passive recipient. As regards Gypsies, they are the living evidence of the inadequacy of this representation of cultural change. As we will see, their centuries-old contact

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[2] The idea of a menaced, disappearing culture, together with the idea of the 'primitive nature' of its members, gave rise to the conviction that the Roma 'had to be saved' from extinction and had to be given the opportunity to 'grow' and to become full members of the 'civilized' society. This belief was present in the nineteenth-century 'Gypsiologists', as well as in the recent theory on Romani scholarization (see Mirella Karpati, *Ròmano Them (Mondo zingaro)* (Rome: Missione cattolica degli Zingari, 1962).

[3] Judith Okely, *The Traveller-Gypsies*, p. 77.

with non-Gypsy cultures should be considered rather in terms of a *selective*, ethnically motivated process of 'cultural osmosis', which by no means can be considered as one-sided.[4] The Romani patterns of 'restricted literacy' that will be analysed here are a clear example of this process.

Despite the manifest lack of foundation of 'Gypsy primitivism', the stereotype still retains much of its negative ascendancy on the popular mind, given the high rate of illiteracy often detected within this group. Illiteracy is generally considered as a sign of lack of development, a sort of reluctance to grow, to become 'civilized' and, in the last resort, as the primal reason for the unavoidable extinction of traditional societies. It is also considered to be directly related to a hypothetical absence of dynamic thought, creativity, internal criticism, capacity of innovation and cultural change. The popular image of the 'Gypsies' as romantic wanderers whose life and precepts are in harmony with the laws of nature, clearly clashes with the use of writing, which is associated with permancence, urban civilization and a stratified socio-economic system.

As will emerge in the course of this section, the Roma have made several attempts to challenge and subvert the stereotypical representations with which 'Gypsy literature' is so conspicuously replete. The main aim of this study is to investigate how Romani intellectuals express their self-representations within a wide range of literary texts, mainly in lyrical compositions. By doing so, we do not mean to trace an exhaustive survey of this kind of literary production, which would be hardly feasible, considering the fragmented and ephemeral nature of its content, but to

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[4] See the interactive nature of ethnic identity, presented in Section 5.i. On the literary side, this dynamism manifests itself in the intertextual interferences detected within the fictional representations of Romani people by Roma and non-Roma authors. As we will see, besides the recurrence of 'Gypsy' themes within Western literature, it is evident that a great deal of Romani literary self-representations display a certain penetration of the same images that deeply permeate Gağe's literary works.

highlight some key features of Romani literary self-representations that will be of use to our reflections on Romani ethnicity. Romani authors are indeed aware of this dispersion and are consequently concerned with the collection and preservation of this *corpus*, that Rajko Djurić has defined as a 'literature in arms, a poetry hardly sketched'.[5]

The emphasis of this study is not placed on cataloguing and categorizing texts and works by Romani intellectuals. Rather, its purpose is to investigate samples of 'literary interferences' occurring in a situation of cultural contact (such as the one between Roma and Gağe), and to consider how these interferences gave rise to significant instances of textual hybridization.[6]

Particular attention will be paid to the literary production of the Italian Roma, as well as to the poetry of female Romani authors, with whom I had the opportunity to dialogue and interact directly 'in the field'. In spite of the emphasis on the Italian case, the analysis will focus on issues which affect all the Roma. Such issues (especially the daily struggle against the Gağe's stereotypes, the lack of communication between Roma and Gağe and the suffering caused by the social marginalization of Romani people) have inspired Romani poets and authors across different countries and languages. The adoption of a 'mixed focus' is necessary when referring to Romani writing, as it is directly linked with the extremely scattered features of the Romani presence among the Gağe.[7] Moreover, this shifting focus

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[5] Rajko Djurić, 'Gli inizi di una nuova letteratura', in Mirella Karpati (ed.), *Zingari ieri e oggi* (Rome: Lacio Drom, 1993), pp. 175-79 (p. 179); my translation.

[6] In this thesis I use the concept of hybridization both in an anthropological sense (see Barth 1969 and Bhabha 1994) and in a linguistic/literary sense (see Bakhtin 1981).

[7] As we will see in Chapter 5, the polylinguistic and 'hybrid' nature of Roma writing defies any attempt to 'classify' and include their literature into traditional, rigid categories.

reflects the structure of the body of Romani literature, which is transnational and multilingual almost 'by definition', given the 'diasporic' location of its authors.[8]

The 'polycentric' nature of Romani literature enables Romani authors to maintain their cultural specificity while at the same time trying to find a common voice for their people. This form of 'dual allegiance' (to their particular group and to the Romani people in general) is quite evident in the case of Romani intellectuals whose 'hybrid' position allows them to shift between their conditions of members of an ethnic minority (within specific national boundaries) and to a wider transnational Romani community.

(i) A 'people without writing'? Revising patterns of Romani literacy

The phenomenon of 'literacy' – the abiltity to read and write - and its related practices and conceptions have been subjected to a series of serious misunderstandings, in the past as well as in the present time. What lies at the root of this profound misconception, as pointed out by Graff, is a substantial epistemological failure of the approaches and representations regarding literacy. This gave rise to several misleading beliefs on the subject, such as the belief in the existence of a supposed 'great divide,' a rigid dichotomization opposing literacy and illiteracy,

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[8] I use the term 'diasporic' in a metaphoric sense, as interpreted by S. Hall when he affirms that 'diaspora does not refer to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return, [which is] the old, imperialising, the hegemonising, form of 'ethnicity'. [...] The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*.' See S. Hall, 'Cultural Diversity and Diaspora', in J. Rutherford (ed.), *Identity*, pp. 222-237 (p. 235) and the essay 'New Ethnicities', in D. Morley and K.-H. Chen (eds.), *Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 441-449. See also Bhabha's concept of cultures 'in-between' in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994). On the notion of cultural contact, see F. Barth, ed., *Ethnic*

writing and orality, which has contributed to the emergence of what H. Graff called the 'literacy myth':

> until recently, scholarly and popular conceptions of the value of the skills of reading and writing have almost universally followed normative assumptions and expectations of vague but powerful concomitants and effects presumed to accompany changes in the diffusion of literacy. For the last two centuries, they have been intertwined with post-Enlightenment, "liberal" social theories and contemporary expectations of the role of literacy and schooling in socioeconomic development, social order, and individual progress. These important conjunctures constitute what I have come to call a "literacy myth".[9]

Since the groundless conviction of the 'savagery' and 'primitivism' of 'Gypsies' has been deeply influenced by the innumerable misconceptions surrounding the Western discourse on literacy, it may be advisable to reveal its lack of foundation through the analysis of the functions effectively performed by writing within the Romani social system. Prior to any sort of investigation into the complex issue of Romani uses of writing, however, it is essential to overcome the orality/writing dichotomy in favour of some more dynamic, articulated notion.

Western definitions of literacy have been largely dominated by its connection with writing. According to the general view, to be fully literate, an individual is expected to master at a basic level the skills of reading and writing, perceived as directly affecting his cognitive processes and abilities. Among the faculties and skills that are thought to be related to the use of writing are the development of 'logic', 'criticism' and 'individual thought'.

The studies by the social anthropologist Jack Goody are chiefly concerned with the analysis of the potentialities and the consequences connected with literacy and

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Groups and Boundaries (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969) and M. L. Pratt' notion of 'transculturation' in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

[9] Harvey J. Graff, *The Legacies of Literacy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 3.

the use of writing.[10] Literacy, Goody argues, is endowed with intrinsic properties that have major implications on human thought and cognition. Given the crucial role played by the 'literacy factor' within human societies, the author proposes to adopt it as a distinguishing criterion in place of the ethnocentric, discredited dichotomy dividing 'primitive' and 'modern' societies. In the author's eyes, placing the emphasis on the literacy practices adopted in a specific cultural context was a good way to avoid the obsolete distinction between the primitives and the civilized. Societies were to be differentiated one from the other in so far as they relied on literate or non-literate modes of communication, not in the light of some alleged disparity observed in the intellectual capacities of their members. Thus the lack of literacy often detected within non-western societies should by no means be related to a supposed deficiency in their mental faculties to be interpreted as a sign of 'underdevelopment' or 'absence of logic'. Logical and critical thought are certainly not exclusive features of Western societies.[11] As opportunely highlighted by Street, this apparently very basic statement is not fully evident in the field of literacy studies. Despite reiterated claims for the rejection of any cognitive opposition between Western and 'traditional' societies, scholars continue to relate differences between cultures to lack of intellectual development, reintroducing in the anthropological debate the notion of 'pre-logical' and 'logical' thought. As pointed out by Brian Street,

> too often what has been taken as 'illogical' or 'mystical' is, in reality, pregnant with symbolic meaning which the observer has failed to

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[10] See J. Goody and I. Watt, 'The Consequences of Literacy', in J. Goody (ed.), *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp. 27-68. See also Goody's *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) and *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[11] Although this may appear quite an obvious statement, it does not seem so obvious in the case of Romani children, to whom teachers assign texts designed for mentally disabled children. Liégeois refers to this practice as 'integration by handicap' (cf. Liégeois, *School Provision for Gypsy and Traveller Children*, p. 68).

> appreciate through attempting to interpret it literally. The anthropological evidence, then, suggests that there is scientific and non-scientific thought in all societies and within all individuals. Observers have simply failed to remark the scientific nature of much of the thinking of so-called 'primitive' people and have perhaps overstated the 'scientific' nature of thinking of their own societies.[12]

Besides not being monopolized by Western societies, logical and scientific thought are not necessarily connected with the acquisition of *alphabetic literacy* (which is mistakenly rated as 'literacy' *tout court*). In fact, far from being a monolithic, self-evident phenomenon, literacy is an extremely varied and complex reality. As stated by Graff,

> there are many kinds of 'literacies.' One need distinguish not only between basic or elementary kinds of literacy and higher levels of education, but also among alphabetic, visual and artistic, spatial and graphic, mathematical, symbolic, technological, and mechanical literacy. An understanding of any one type requires care in qualifying terms and specifying what precisely is meant by reference to 'literacy.' These many 'literacies' are all conceptually distinct, but nonetheless interrelated.[13]

It is also worth observing that general claims for the radical changes performed by literacy on human cognition are simply too vague and abstract to be factually proved. As emphasized by Street in his critique of Goody's notion of literacy, there is a patent discrepancy between the specific kind of literacy to which the author refers, that is, alphabetic literacy in particular, and the pervasiveness and universality of the implications of this form of literacy. This shows that, by restricting the notion of literacy to alphabetic literacy one risks reinforcing the unjustified dichotomy between literate/non-literate societies (which is not less categorical and biased than the old-fashioned primitive/modern polarity). Secondly, one fails to acknowledge that, contrary to common belief, societies are not likely to be defined neatly as purely

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[12] Brian V. Street, *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 25-26.
[13] H. Graff, *The Legacies of Literacy*, p. 11.

'oral' or 'literate', the reality being that of an actual combination of oral and literate modes of communication. Ruth Finnegan wrote that 'even in areas outside the great span – in Australia for example, the South Pacific or Amerindia – [...] it would be hard to find an example of either of the supposed mutually exclusive "pure" types of culture'.[14] In reality, Finnegan seems to point out, it is a 'mixed', partly oral and partly written type of communication that prevails. Similarly, G. R. Cardona has revealed that the possibility of finding a society completely unaware of the existence of writing[15] is fairly remote, emphasizing that the lack of an alphabetical writing system does not automatically imply the total absence of any writing typology: 'assuming that writing consists in the production and the use of graphic systems for communicative purpose [...], every society will develop the typology or writing more congenial and necessary'.[16]

These considerations seem to apply also to the case of the Roma, usually labelled as people 'without writing'. After many centuries of contact with cultures displaying very high literacy rates, the Roma are still preserving a mainly oral system of communication, which is perfectly functional in their socio-economic system. They do not make use of writing for administrative purposes connected with the socio-economic sphere (the eventual *surplus* is redistributed or invested in 'luxury' nonessential goods not likely to be capitalized), nor for juridical purposes, since among them the dispensation of justice is a communal, pragmatic responsibility.[17] Furthermore, the Romani social system does not include the presence of a clergy

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[14] Ruth Finnegan, 'Orality and Literacy: Some Problems of Definition and Research', unpublished MS, 1981, quoted in B. Street, *Literacy in Theory and Practice*, pp. 45-46.

[15] Writing is here conceived in its broader sense, not only limited to alphabetic writing.

[16] Giorgio Raimondo Cardona, *I linguaggi del sapere* (Bari: Laterza, 1990), p. 207; my translation.

[17] See L. Piasere, *Mare Roma: catégories humaines et structure sociale. Une contribution à l'ethnologie tsigane* (Paris: Études et Documents Balkaniques et Méditerranéens, 1985).

– traditionally the main holders of the body of knowledge that is necessary to the mastery of writing – as apparently the Roma neither profess a specific religion nor observe an autonomous corpus of ceremonial practices and rites. Their devotion and their transcendental beliefs, in fact, are not easily encapsulated in a pre-existent religious cult, and they tend to adopt those of the 'host' cultures. Finally, the Roma rely mostly on oral means of expression in order to pass down their stories and narratives, even though there is no evidence of a proper 'literary tradition' among them.[18]

Uncritical amplification of the above-cited features has favoured the emergence of the notorious image of the Roma as a 'people without writing'.[19] As we shall see, this definition is clearly misleading, considering the actual knowledge and diversified uses of the written medium among the Roma. In their case, instead of a complete 'lack of writing', we should therefore refer to a pattern of 'restricted literacy' or, as will be clarified in the following section, of a 'passive command' of the written code.

Until now, the Roma have kept themselves on the margins of the Gağe's communication system, devising and developing their own specific patterns of communication. Recent research on Romani uses of writing[20] reveals that some groups of Roma actually handle a range of graphic systems for many purposes, such as the transmission of directions, information about the safety of a specific itinerary, or the way taken by other members of the group. It is the case of the *patrin*, 'itinerant' signs adopted by many Romani groups (among which the Slovenian-Croatian Roma) and consisting of objects such as leaves, stones, hay, twigs and a

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[18] See Jane Dick-Zatta, 'La tradizione orale dei Rom Sloveni', in *Lacio Drom*, 3-4 (1986), 2-55.

[19] Expression used by Lévi-Strauss to replace the definition of traditional societies as 'primitive'; see Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 15.

[20] See L. Piasere, 'I segni "segreti" degli Zingari', in *La Ricerca Folklorica*, 31 (1995), 83-105.

variety of waste material, ranging from rags to excrement, whose 'low', humble nature was likely to preserve the secrecy of the information conveyed. Researchers have identified a limited set of signals, halt signs, transit signs and direction signs, but among the Slovenian-Croatian Roma there seems to be a broader variety of information: signs of 'tranquillity', 'emergency', 'warning' and 'escaping' and so on.

Besides this instrumental use of writing, which displays a kind of 'degré zero de l'écriture', in Barthes' terms, anthropologists have also detected the use of graphic codes for economic purposes[21] and, last but not least, instances of 'oral' uses of writing, where the written texts (mainly in the form of brief, formulaic expressions found in letters or postcards) are meant to act as a kind of 'surrogate' of the real contact between people, a tangible sign of someone's affection despite their temporary absence.[22] Finally, we have to acknowledge the rise of written literature among the Roma, dating from the 1950s, whose analysis will be specifically investigated in the following part of this study.

By being in close contact with cultures that rely on written communication, the Roma developed a special relationship to alphabetic writing and its cultural and social implications. Only a particular group of Roma adopted this form of communication. Writing, as anthropologists point out, is a code, a system of signs whose deciphering depends on another semiotic system, that of the spoken language. But writing, far from being merely a secondary semiotic system (in other words, a mere transposition of spoken language), is a multi-faceted phenomenon, 'whose meaning, including any consequences it may have for the individual and society, depends crucially on the social practices surrounding it and on the ideological system

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[21] See Piasere, 'I segni "segreti" degli Zingari', 93-96.

in which it is embedded'.[23] Correspondingly, literacy is a material technology that involves the acquisition of numerous skills, but it is also a *medium* of representation, which carries a wide range of symbolic connotation. In this respect writing is more than a neutral, aseptic technology, as it is deeply embedded in the social context and permeated by the sociocultural patterns of a specific culture. Moreover, writing practices are concerned with the 'domain' of ideology, and they can act as means of ethnic resistance or oppression.[24] From this point of view the attitude of the Roma towards writing could be defined as a form of 'passive command'. The acquisition of written skills implies prolonged incorporation into formal institutions, which is a potential factor of acculturation.[25] The restriction of the use of writing to a small élite is therefore a 'sociological device' aimed at reducing the risks of assimilation, as well as inhibiting the full completion of the social implications of literacy.[26] So

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[22] See Patrick Williams, "La scrittura fra l'orale e lo scritto", in D. Fabre (ed), *Per iscritto. Antropologia delle scritture quotidiane* (Lecce: Argo, 1998 (first publ. *Par écrit. Ethnologie des écritures quotidiennes*, Paris 1997), pp. 79-99.

[23] Tim Ingold (ed.), *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 533. For a discussion of the role of the educational system in the social reproduction of generalized values and patterns of behaviour, together with the enforcement of specific ideologies and structures of dominance, see Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture* (London: Sage, 1977).

[24] In this regard Graff links up the notion of literacy with the Gramscian concept of 'hegemony', conceived as the process through which a political system achieves and maintains its consensual basis without the use of physical force: 'Literacy is not a likely technique for domination or coercion; ...however, it has proved a much more viable option ...for establishing and maintaining social and cultural hegemony' (Graff, *The Legacies of Literacy*, p. 12).

[25] Here acculturation is understood in the sense of 'assimilation'. In its broader sense, acculturation is 'the process of culture change set in motion by the meeting of two autonomous cultural systems', and it 'subsumes a number of different processes including diffusion, reactive adaptation, various kinds of social and cultural reorganization subsequent to contact, and "deculturation" or cultural disintegration. The range of adjustments that results includes the retention of substantial cultural autonomy ("stabilized pluralism") or, more typically, the assimilation of a weaker by a stronger contacting group, and (though rarely) cultural fusion, whereby two cultures may exchange enough elements to produce a distinctinve successor culture', Barfield, *The Dictionary of Anthropology*, p. 1.

[26] The Gypsy approach to education, which is informal and intergenerational, is radically opposed to the Western educational system, whose crucial features are formality and decontextualization. Unfortunately, what is a matter of incompatibility between enculturation systems has been reductively interpreted as an additional manifestation of 'Gypsy primitivism', fostering the commonplace that Gypsies have never had any sort of contact with written technology, and should therefore be considered 'people without writing'.
The ethnocentric approach of Western education is at the origin of the high illiteracy rate detected among the Roma in Europe (see Jean-Pierre Liégeois, *School Provision for Gypsy and Traveller*

far, this restriction has obviously prevented the growth of a substantial corpus of written texts, as well as the formation of a proper readership among Romani groups. With the recent emergence of a written literature by Romani authors we seem to be confronted with a radical reversal of trend. This new 'tendency' is closely connected with the rise of a Romani intelligentsia, whose members are particularly active in promoting the diffusion of a common language, *romanes*, and the fostering of Romani identity. These intellectuals no longer perceive writing as a sort of 'menace' towards their own cultural heritage or as a means of communication for the exclusive use of the Gağe. They seem to insist particularly on the constructive side of writing, instead of dwelling on its external use for assimilation purposes. It is as if, after being for centuries the silent target of innumerable representations, the frozen image of the 'Gypsy' was finally given voice in order to uncover the inconsistencies of literary clichès and to challenge misleading representations of Romani identity. The following sections of this chapter are devoted to an analysis of the peculiar features of this hitherto unheard voice, dwelling especially on its striking complexity and diversification. Ironically, Romani literature is still classified as 'primitive', 'spontaneous' and 'unsophisticated'. As we will see, the highly diversified, original features of Romani literature belie this view: far from being a 'primitive', simple

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Children: A Syntesis Report (Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 1987), updated in 1994 and the report by the European Commission, *School Provision for Gypsy and Traveller Children* (Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 1997)). Despite the number of circulars and recommendations issued on the matter by national governments as well as European institutions, Romani scholarization is still extremely problematic. In 1984 the European Parliament adopted two resolutions to urge the Commission of the European Communities to take proactive action concerning the field of Romani education. In 1987, the Commission published a report (the above-cited *School Provision for Gypsy and Traveller Children*) on the educational situation of Romani people in Europe, producing a series of working proposals and recommendations subsequently examined and discussed by Ministers for Education, teachers, associations concerned with Romani issues and organizations run by Roma. This careful examination led to the adoption by the European Council and the Ministers for Education of the 1989 Resolution, acknowledging and promoting the knowledge of Romani culture and language. In 1991 the Council of Europe issued a Resolution (125), after which the Council for Cultural Co-operation

phenomenon, the Romani voice could be rather defined as the polyphonic combination of multiple 'utterances' and 'modes of speech' with different configurations and purposes. In the next section we will try to highlight the linguistic aspects of this complexity, which is connected with the specific features of the Romani language, particularly its dialect variations and structural transformation.

(i.i) Romani chib: the creation of a common language

As with many other aspects of Romani culture and history, the Romani language (*romani chib* or *romanes*) has been frequently subjected to all sorts of misconceptions and misrepresentations. For a long time *romanes* has been denied the status of a proper language and has been considered nothing more than a jargon, a sort of secret code whose main function was to cover up the supposed misdeeds of its treacherous speakers. As already seen in the previous chapter, within Western literary works the language spoken by 'Gypsy' characters was variously represented as some sort of 'secret' speech often completely made up, its main function being essentially that of entertaining and amusing the readers or the audience.[27] A clear example of linguistic 'forgery' carried out to achieve comic effects – but also to the detriment of ethnographic accuracy – is represented by the play *La Zingana* written by G. A. Giancarli in 1544, already mentioned in Chapter 2. The so-called 'Gypsy

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(CDCC) organized several seminars on Romani education and published a number of reports and information handbooks.

[27] A remarkable exception to the fictitious representations of the language of the 'Gypsies' is the seventeenth-century play by Florido De Silvestris *Signorina Zingaretta*, where *romanes* is authentic. On this comedy, see the study by Piasere *Il più antico testo italiano in romanes (1646): una riscoperta e una lettura etnostorica* (Verona: Libreria Universitaria, 1994).

language' devised by Giancarli and attributed to the 'Gypsy' lady has nothing to do with real *romanes*, but is an invented jargon combining Venetian with Arabic.[28]

Erroneous views and literary mistifications of the kind mentioned above have their origin in the complete lack of knowledge that surrounded this crucial aspect of Romani culture for centuries. It is only at the end of the eighteenth century that scholars discovered the derivation of *romanes* from sanskrit. The complex configuration of this language has been compared to that of an 'onion', as it consists in the accumulation of several 'layers' one upon the other. Three quarters of the Romani vocabulary (which is frequently defined as the 'core' of *romanes*) are of Indian origin. In the course of time, Romani has also incorporated numerous borrowings from Iranian languages, Armenian, Greek and, as far as more recent word-loans are concerned, borrowings from European languages (among which Slavic languages, German, Hungarian, Romanian and Italian). It is from the careful study of lexical, phonetical and grammatical transformations of Romani that scholars try to reconstruct the routes followed by the Roma during their migrations.[29]

Romanes includes a great number of dialects. The process of dialect variation, which started well before their arrival in Europe, has been further complicated by the influence of languages spoken in the European countries that the Roma have crossed or inhabited. From at least the fourteenth/fifteenth century the evolution of *romanes* has thus been variously affected by European languages, and was characterized by

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[28] See Section 2.i.i.

[29] In this regard, the studies published by Ian Hancock (professor of Romani Studies at the University of Texas), are of crucial relevance. Hancock is author of a great number of publications especially focused on Romani history and language among which *The Pariah Syndrome: An Account of Gypsy Persecution and Slavery* (Ann Arbor: Karoma, 1987) and *A Handbook of Vlax Romani* (Columbus: Slavica Publishers, 1995), to which I refer repeatedly in this part of the thesis.

the emergence of several dialects:

> since [their arrival in Europe] different clans have developed separate features that may or may not have been present in the original dialects. In particular the dialects of sedentary Roma have also been affected by the languages of the majority population where they live. As a consequence there are many dialects.[30]

In the attempt to arrive at an efficient – though not exhaustive – classification of these dialects, scholars have divided them into a certain number of groupings and sub-groupings. A first group, which dates back to the arrival of the Roma in Europe, is the Balkan-Carpathian-Baltic group; a second group is circumscribed to the Balkans and a third group (Vlax Romani), the most widespread one, extends from Russia, Sweden and France to the Americas. The identification and categorization of Romani dialects is extremely problematic. Geographical criteria are often employed for systematizing purposes, but they are clearly unsatisfactory. Additional factors should always be taken into account, such as nomadism, sedentarization and generally the historical vicissitudes undergone by every single Romani group. It is the dynamic interplay of all these variables that is accountable for specific patterns of linguistic transformations and lexical borrowings. The influence exerted by the languages of 'host countries' on the grammatical and lexical features of *romanes*, for example, may vary greatly, depending on the different duration and features of Roma's presence and patterns of settlements, as well as the specific policies adopted in their regard. In the case of the so-called 'para-romani' languages, this influence has determined the replacement of the original grammatical structure of *romanes* by that of the local language. Although these languages are unmistakeably related to Romani, from which they draw a great number of lexemes, they can no longer be

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[30] P. Bakker and H. Kyuchukov (eds), *What is the Romani language?* (Hatfield: Centre de recherches tsiganes and University of Hertfordshire Press, 2000), p. 70.

considered as part of the *romani chib*.

As one might expect, despite a common Romani basis that allows the speakers a certain degree of communication, the multiplicity of Romani dialects and their different spelling variants can cause several problems of inter-comprehension. This is why, during the last few decades, an increasing number of Roma have felt the need for the unification and the standardization of Romani. The need for a common Romani language had already emerged during the first World Romani Congress, in 1971. Since then, the Linguistics Commission of the International Romani Union has worked on the complex task of the standardization of *romanes*, which led to the adoption, at the IV World Romani Congress held in Warsaw in 1990, of the standard Romani alphabet proposed by Marcel Courthiade. Until now, this standard alphabet has been used in written publications of different nature and purposes (from educational material to linguistic research), but it is still restricted to a small minority of Romani intellectuals.

From what has been said above, it is clear that the process of phonetic 'normalization' is only the first step towards the creation of a standard language, which is still far from being achieved. This is not at all surprising, considering that 'the unification of a language cannot be decided in an office, and it is not enough simply to discuss the theoretical side of the question', as Giulio Soravia has rightly stressed[31]. Essentially, fragmentation is still the predominant feature of the *romani chib*. This is amply testified by the variety of linguistic choices performed by the Romani authors in their written works, some of which will be examined in greater detail in the course of this study.

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[31] See Soravia, Giulio. 'A Wandering Voice: The Language of the Gypsies.' *The Patrin Web Journal Home Page*. 21 Jan. 2002. 11 Nov. 2002. <http://www.Geoticies.com/Paris/5121/language.htm>.

Although *romanes* is mainly an oral language, there is evidence of its use in a written form in the past. Transcriptions of Romani were initially performed by non-Roma scholars devoted to the study and the investigation of Romani traditions and folklore. From the late nineteenth century, however, there has been an increasing tendency among Romani speakers to write in Romani. This point is strongly emphasized by Ian Hancock in his *Handbook of Vlax Romani*:

> it is a commonly-repeated fallacy that Romani is not a written language. It has, in fact, been written for over a century. [...] Since the last quarter of the 19th century, a steadily-increasing number of individuals, native speakers themselves, have attempted to set the language down on paper for their own purposes.[32]

This limited, 'personal' use of written Romani, however significant and worthy of further study, did not substantially contribute to the creation of a common language. This is due to the fact that before the establishment of a standardized phonemic spelling of *romanes*, the spelling conventions adopted by Romani speakers were generally adapted from the various languages spoken in the countries where they lived. As a consequence, there have been samples of Romani written with a French, English or German-based spelling, and so on.

The introduction of the standard spelling by the International Romani Union is crucial to the aims of linguistic standardization on a technical, abstract level. In practice, however, the realization of this goal is still quite remote. In this context, the recent formation and diffusion of a written literary production in *romanes* can be considered a phenomenon of extreme relevance that could make a valuable contribution to the linguistic unification of Romani language.

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[32] Ian Hancock, *A Handbook of Vlax Romani* (Columbus: Slavica Publishers, 1995), p. 34.

(i.ii) The birth of a new intelligentsia: definitions and social functions of Romani intellectuals[33]

Before addressing the main features of the Romani intelligentsia it is important to clarify the terminology which has been applied to this subject, as well as its critical implications. For a long time, individuals in the so-called 'traditional' societies have been considered severely impaired in their intellectual abilities. An alleged lack in their capability of abstract thinking was frequently mentioned as the sign of their 'wildness' and 'primitivism'; immersed in the realm of orality and confined to a condition of savagery, 'primitive people' were thought to be utterly incapable of the sophisticated mental process evoked by the term 'intellectual'. The anthropological recognition and investigation of non-western cosmologies and systems of belief have profoundly changed this view. Nonetheless, there is still a widespread reticence to refer to the existence of 'proper' intellectuals in Romani society. The term intellectual is still biased by Western connotation, and in fact, a great number of Romani poets display a certain reluctance to accept this denomination. Indeed, if we consider the term 'intellectuals' as denoting members of a specific profession, their presence in many non-Western societies might be difficult to detect with certainty, but this does not mean that intellectuals are exclusive to 'modern' societies in contrast with 'traditional' ones. The appellation of intellectual can be understood to embrace every individual engaged in the preservation, transmission and critical examination

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[33] The term 'intelligentsia', originally derived from the Latin word *intellegentia* (from *intellegere*, that is, to perceive, to understand), is borrowed from Russian (in mid-nineteenth century Russia the term was used to describe a small educated minority particularly active in the public sphere). In this thesis I use this word in a broad sense, in order to refer to an international group of Roma actively involved in the study and the preservation of Romani culture and identity.

of the cultural heritage of his/her own membership group.[34] By adopting this definition we are forced to admit their indisputable presence also in traditional societies, regardless of the standard of schooling reached by their members. It is in this sense that I have no hesitation in referring to Romani poets as intellectuals.

Besides this broad definition of an intellectual, it is certainly possible to acknowledge the existence of a Romani 'intelligentsia' in a strict sense. The use of the term *intelligentsia* in this study tends to emphasize the formation of an organized international movement of Roma entirely devoted the study and the diffusion of their culture, and it is currently used by Romani intellectuals in their self-definitions. For most of them, their intellectual activity represents an actual profession. We may thus find Romani teachers, scholars, linguists, historians, journalists as well as full-time artists, writers and poets, who could be considered the great 'bulk' of what we term here as the Romani intelligentsia. What is the position of these intellectuals within their community?

As we have seen earlier in this chapter, Romani society is not characterized by a hierarchical form of socio-economic stratification, but is extremely fluid and decentralized, as emphasized by students of Roma's economy and social system.[35] In her research on the Slovenian-Croatian Roma, for instance, Jane Dick-Zatta defines their social organization as 'an informal association of nuclear families related by kinship'. Within this 'informal association' every nuclear unity enjoys considerable autonomy and may detach itself from the community at any time to join

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[34] On the definition of intellectuals in traditional societies see Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*, pp. 19-35.

[35] See for instance L. Piasere, *Mare Roma: catégories humaines et structure sociale*, E. Tauber, *Studi sugli Zingari*, in *Lacio Drom* 5 (1994); L. Piasere (ed), *Comunità Girovaghe, Comunità Zingare* (Napoli: Liguori, 1995).

another group of Roma:

> [la società rom] si configura come un'associazione informale di famiglie nucleari imparentate fra loro, [dove] ogni famiglia nucleare è un'unità a sé stante che può distaccarsi in qualsiasi momento per andare a raggiungere un altro gruppo, cosa che accade abbastanza frequentemente.[36]

Romani society is a clear example of 'acephalous' society, that is, it does not present a centralized political system. The absence of a centralized pattern of authority, however, should not be interpreted as a complete lack of order and rules or even as a sign of anarchy, but is efficiently compensated by the perception of a common ethnic and cultural identity. In fact, the extreme flexibility of Romani society is effectively 'counter-balanced' by a strong internal cohesiveness, reinforced and maintained by close family ties. Some members of the group may occasionally act as 'mediators'[37] in case of disputes and disagreements, but they are not attributed any tangible, effective power over the other Roma. It is the group as a whole, the collective, to be provided with coercive power.

Although the mediators have no substantial authority (except for a sort of 'moral authority'), they are held in great respect and are likely to achieve a certain degree of personal prestige within their community. This is why they tend also to act as representative of the community and to be responsible for the relationships with the Gağe. It is precisely in this context that the use of writing is likely to play a major role, as the Gağe rely heavily on this medium.

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[36] 'Romani society could be seen as an 'informal' association of nuclear families related by kinship, within which every family is an independent unit that can detach itself and join another group at any time, which is often the case'. Jane Dick-Zatta, 'I Rom sloveni di Piove di Sacco', in *Lacio Drom*, 1-2 (1985), 2-79; my translation.

[37] See for instance the role performed by the elderly as mediators among the Slovenian Croatian Roma (the *phurano dat*, that is 'grandfather, old father' and the *phurani daj*, the 'grandmother'), or the role of the *baro Rom* (big man) and the *plešnori* (peacemaker) among the xoraxané (Turkish) Romà.

Romani intellectuals, with their knowledge of writing and their familiarity with communication technologies, are seen as natural interlocutors in the relations with the Gağe. From this point of view, we could consider them as a sort of 'mediators' between their culture and that of the Gağe. Their role as intermediaries, as for big men and peacemakers[38] is not exploited to achieve positions of power and political authority, although in some cases their important function and academic achievements could be regarded as a source of social prestige. It is important to note that their advanced literacy skills are crucial in emphasizing the biased representations of 'Gypsies' within the body of Western literature and the press. In other words, gaining access to the sources of hegemonic discourse on 'Gypsies' may represent the first step towards the formulation of an alternative, counter-hegemonic discourse. It may also entail a capacity to challenge stereotypes and misconceptions by giving voice to a range of self-representations hitherto unexpressed and marginalized.

The features of the activities performed by Romani intellectuals are almost twofold. On the one hand, the role of the mediator is an essential function whose social utility is indisputable, since the contact with the Gağe and their communication system is vital to the Roma. On the other hand, their position as mediators implies a sort of 'hybrid' condition, which is often surrounded by an aura of suspicion. Among many Romani groups, one of the reasons for the distrust of

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[38] The term 'big man' (derived from Melanesian ethnography) is used here to define the leader of a small group who, despite not holding a position of formal authority, 'acts as a focal point for the exchange of goods between local communities' (Seymour-Smith, p. 24). I use the term *peacemaker* in the sense of 'mediator', a person designated to settle conflicts and resolve disputes within the group – see in particular the function of the *plešnóri* in Romani society, analysed by Piasere in his article 'Gli uomini di pace dei Xoraxané Romá', in L. Piasere, *Popoli delle discariche* (Rome: CISU, 1991), pp. 37-57.

writing is that it is supposed to make someone exposed to the Gağe's lies.[39] The perils of cultural assimilation are here clearly highlighted. To a certain extent, the encounter with Alterity is sought after and welcomed among the Roma, but it is also considered a potential source of assimilation and therefore carefully restricted.[40] Needless to say, it is rather probable that this ambivalent attitude may also include those Roma who are in direct contact with the Gağe.

Clearly, the main reason for suspicion is the risk implied in the cultural hybridity of Romani intellectuals, their crossing of cultural boundaries that are heavily invested with symbolic meaning. A well-known – and rather extreme – example of this risk is represented by the case of the poetess Papusza,[41] who was expelled from her group (the Polska Roma) due to her association with the Polish poet Jerzy Ficowski. The motivation of the expulsion was not the use of writing itself, but the manipulation of Papusza's image to support the government's policy of compulsory sedentarization:

> Ce sont avant tous les pressions de l'administration, alimentées par les menées de Ficowski utilisant le nom de Papuśa, qui déclenchent l'indignation des Rroms, et non le fait que l'une d'elle mette par écrit ses improvisations. (...) Interpréter le rejet de l'écriture par le Rrom comme la cause initiale des tourments qui s'abattent sur Papuśa revient à une tentative triviale de réinsertion du problème dans le stéréotype habituel du Tsigane nomade, farouche, illettré et décidé à le rester, inventé par les gadjés et susurré dans tous les documentaires avec la componction paternaliste des bien-pensants.[42]

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[39] Cf. J. Dick-Zatta, 'Tradizione orale e contesto sociale: i Roma sloveni e la televisione' (1996); see also J. Dick-Zatta, 'La tradizione orale dei Rom Sloveni' (1986).

[40] As we will see, the encounter with the Other lies at the very roots of any self-definition. In this sense, as a cognitive device for the cognitive organization of the outer reality, it is largely inescapable. On the process of formation of ethnic identity see Section 5.i.

[41] See Section 4.i.ii.

[42] 'It is primarily the pressures from the administration, fostered by the manoeuvrings of Ficowski, who exploited the name of Papusza that caused the indignation of the Roma, not the fact that one of them put down in writing her improvisations. (...) To interpret the Roma's refusal of writing as the primal cause of the torments of Papusza amounts to a trivial attempt to ascribe the problem to the common stereotype of the nomad 'Gypsy', obstinate, non-literate and determined to remain so, devised by the Gağe and suggested in all the documentaries with the paternalistic complicity of the

Writing is not rejected a priori by the Roma as systematically disruptive to Romani society; it is its use outside the protective boundaries of the group that causes perplexity. By the same token, the rise of a Romani intelligentsia is also a process which frequently gives rise to attitudes of disbelief, resistance and even fierce opposition among members of their groups and more in general among the advocates of a more 'traditional' approach. Yet the resistance with which the intellectuals frequently meet should be read as a sign of the crucial significance of their role for the life of their group.

Romani intellectuals first began to give rise to a co-ordinated movement during the 1980s.[43] Since then, their sphere of action has been constantly developing and diversifying, including crucial issues such as human rights protection, political representation and the preservation and diffusion of Romani language and culture. Romani organizations are characterized by an extreme fragmentation. There are, however, some recurrent themes that provide us with a sort of common thread animating the aims and programs of these organizations, regardless of their specific

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right-minded people'. Marcel Courthiade, '"Papuśa" des mots, un destin', *Etudes Tsiganes*, 9 (1997), 35-52 (pp. 40-41); my translation.

[43] It was under the repressive political regimes of Eastern Europe that the Roma first began to organize themselves on an ethnic basis. In this area compulsory education, initially regarded as a threat to the integrity of Romani culture, has in fact contributed to its survival through the use of modern technologies and means of communication. Romani intellectuals in Eastern Europe are generally engaged in vibrant political activity, aimed at awakening public opinion to issues of crucial interest such as those related to human rights protection and racial discrimination. Links with Romani intellectuals of other nationalities are constantly sought after and encouraged, in order to give rise to an international movement whose diffusion is clearly detectable also in Western European countries. The first Romani organizations appeared in the Soviet Union towards the end of the 1920s. With the advent of the Stalinist regime all initiatives concerning the recognition of the Roma as an ethnic minority were brought abruptly to a halt. Within the same period, the first Romani associations were founded in Romania and Greece. The aftermath of World War II – and later especially the years after the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) - saw the formation of Romani associations all over Europe. The birth of an international federation of Romani organizations dates back to 1967, foundation year of the *Comité international tsigane*. The first world-wide Romani congress (during which a Romani flag and hymn were established) was held in London in 1971, the second took place in Geneva in 1978. On that occasion the *International Romani Union* (IRU) was founded. The Romani Union is a non-profit, non-governmental organization recognized by the UN that is mainly concerned with political and minority rights issues. It also promotes researches and study into Romani history, arts and

configuration and geographical dispersion. Before moving to an analysis of the formation and the features of the Romani intelligentsia, it will be useful to look briefly at these dominant themes, which also play a central part within the literary texts included in the next chapter.

Above all, Romani intellectuals place particular emphasis on the promotion and the study of Romani language. *Romanes* is unanimously regarded as a precious source of cultural identity and acts as an invaluable point of reference for all the Roma. By looking at the language, Romani scholars try to reconstruct the complex path of ancient and modern migrations that have spread the Roma all over the world.[44] By investigating the historical roots of the language, from etymology to lexical variations, linguists seek to uncover the origins and the vicissitudes of their scattered people. Another important point is that the written language is considered a way to establish a dialogue with the Gağe, to overcome the centuries-old prejudices and misconceptions characterizing the relationship between Roma and 'host societies'. Without communication with the non-Roma, there is no hope of raising public awareness or to alert governments and public bodies to Romani issues. More importantly, written communication is a key factor in providing extensive links between Roma and strengthening the perception of ethnic unity. In the absence of a territorial entity to which the Roma may refer as their common nation, the creation of an informational web provides the basis for a 'virtual community' world-wide.

Another important feature to be mentioned concerns the creative role played by

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language. The 1990s have seen an exponential growth of the number of Romani organizations, as well as of congresses, conferences and seminars both on a national and international level.

[44] For a detailed list of publications on Romani history, see Diane Tong, *Gypsies: A Multidisciplinary Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1995).

leading exponents of the Romani intelligentsia in shaping and redefining the idea of a common Romani identity. As Isabel Fonseca pointed out, 'the language (and increasingly the written language) is the cornerstone of modern Gypsy identity and emancipation.'[45] The emergence of a Romani intelligentsia, together with the growing diffusion of writing and literacy, is likely to affect the discourse on Romani identity in many ways. The use of the media endows the Roma with the capacity to unmask the stereotypes forged by the Gağe. Furthermore, it gives them the opportunity to regain possession of an image that has been distorted and shaped in order to serve purposes detrimental to the Roma's cause.[46] This operation leads inevitably to a redefinition of the Romani image as opposed to representations of the 'Gypsy'. Romani intellectuals, we read in the 'International Romani Union Charter', 'have decided to unite [their] forces to sustain and develop the Romani Nation'.[47]

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[45] Isabel Fonseca, *Bury Me Standing* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 11.

[46] Cf. the concept of cultural construction of social deviance discussed in Chapter 1.

[47] The Roma's call for union and the formation of a Romani nation should not be interpreted in terms of territorial or political ambition. Rather, they display a strong need for cultural union and, as far as the relationship with the Gağe is concerned, a desire for cooperation and promotion of fundamental human rights in all nations. This desire for unity led to the adoption of a common Romani anthem that became immediatly popular among the Roma from various countries (especially those from Eastern Europe). The Romani flag was first established in 1933, and consists of a blue stripe symbolising the sky, a green one representing the green earth and a wheel at the centre.
The song *Gelem, Gelem*, also known as *Djelem, Djelem*, *Opré Roma*, and *Romale Chavale*, was inspired by the Romani Holocaust. There are several versions of this traditional melody, whose origin is still uncertain. According to some, it originated in Romania and it subsequently acquired remarkable popularity in variety shows in Paris between the 1920s and the 1930s. In any case, it enjoyed great popularity among the Serbian Roma during the 1960's, and it became popular throughout Europe in the late 60's, due to Alexander Petrovic's film *Skupljaci perja* (*The Buyer of Feathers*), better known as *I Have Met Some Happy Gypsies*. The song, in a new variant devised by Jarko Jovanovic and Dr. Jan Cibula, was adopted by the Romani Union during its Second Congress, held in Geneva in 1978. GELEM, GELEM: Gelem, gelem, lungone dromensa / Maladilem bahktale Romensa / A Romale katar tumen aven, / E tsarensa bahktale dromensa? / A Romale, A Chavale / Vi man sas ek bari familiya, / Murdadas la e kali legija / Aven mansa sa lumniake Roma, / Kai putaile e romane droma / Ake vriama, usti Rom akana, / 'men khutasa misto kai kerasa / A Romale, A Chavale. (I went, I went on long roads / I met happy Roma / O Roma where do you come from, / With tents on happy roads? / O Roma, O fellow Roma / I once had a great family, / The Black Legions murdered them / Come with me Roma from all the world / For the Romani roads have opened / Now is the time, rise up Roma now, / We will rise high if we act / O Roma, O fellow Roma). From *The Romano Drom Song Book* by D. Stanley and R. Burke (Brentwood: Romanestan Publications, 1986), p. 31). The 'Black Legions' mentioned in the text refer to the SS.
The English translation appeared in *The Patrin Web Journal Home Page*. 21 Jan. 2002. 11 Nov. 2002. <http://www.geocities.com/Paris/5121/gelem.htm>.

The aims of their activities are 'to develop all the favorable qualities of the Romani, their cultural traditions, customs and language'; 'to respect fundamental human rights and liberties', 'to contribute to the preservation and sustenance of world peace and safety' and to 'develop friendly relationships among nations based on respect paid to equal rights and equality of nations'. Romani intellectuals combine the international vocation of their movement with their determination to assist and support Romani people considering their specific location and living conditions: they expressly undertake to 'cooperate in resolving of economic, social, cultural, educational, and humanitarian problems of the Romani in each of the individual countries in which they live'. This double allegiance, which could be defined as the dominant feature of the Romani intelligentsia, is also the main challenge to the establishment of a sense of effective unity that transcends the irreducible specificity of every single Romani group, with its own particular features and needs.

There are many obstacles and barriers that still hamper the achievement of this crucial goal; primarily, the extreme geographical dispersion of Romani people – mirrored by the dispersion of Romani organizations – and the consequent lack of communication among distant groups. The very fragmentation of Romani language into a plethora of different dialects cannot but further aggravate the effects of such dispersal, as it could lead eventually to a situation of complete linguistic incomprehension. This clearly emerges also from the analysis of Romani written literature, whose characteristic features can be largely ascribed to the world-wide dispersion of Romani people. The works that form the body of this written production, as already pointed out, are generally scattered and fragmented. They do not display a uniformity of style and language: they include transcriptions of oral narrative as well as autobiographical accounts, novels, comedies and poetry

collections. The authors' profiles are also extremely various, ranging from the professional writer to the 'amateur' artist. Some of them tend to distrust the use of languages other than *romanes* and are particularly concerned with the preservation of the *cace rromane lava* (true Romani words), discouraging excessive external borrowing, while others have introduced into the Romani language 'foreign' lyrical patterns. As far as the linguistic fragmentation of Romani literature is concerned, besides the written production in Romani idioms we observe a large diffusion of works by Roma written exclusively in the languages of the Gağe. Mirella Karpati emphasizes this fact when she affirms that the Roma

> preferiscono scrivere le loro opere più importanti nella lingua del paese ospitante, come Menyhért Lakatos, [...] Matéo Maximoff, autore di numerosi romanzi di ambiente zingaro, ma di lingua francese, come francesi sono le raccolte di poesie di Sandra Jayat e di Sterna Weltz-Ziegler. Così esistono ottime edizioni di fiabe in tedesco.[48]

Karpati ascribes this phenomenon to a number of factors, above all the high illiteracy rate among the Roma. In addition, she mentions the attitude of distrust of those Roma who insist on keeping *romanes* a 'secret' language to protect it from the influence of the majority society. In Karpati's view, however, the main reason for the use of languages other than *romanes* is the Roma's intention to address explicitly the Gağe in order to promote the knowledge of their people and fight prejudice.[49]

Romani authors seem to resort to the languages of the Gağe to grant their texts the widest possible diffusion and to signify the need for the public recognition of their mistaken identities. In this context, the role of translation appears clear. Translations from *romanes* are generally provided by the Roma themselves[50] or by

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[48] M. Karpati, 'La tradizione romani fra oralità e scrittura', *Lacio Drom*, 1 (1989), 30-34 (p. 20).
[49] See M. Karpati, 'La tradizione romani fra oralità e scrittura', p. 20.
[50] See in particular the texts by the Italian Roma and the collection *The Roads of the Roma*, edited by Romani authors Ian Hancock and Rajko Djuric.

'enlightened' Gağe whose main objective is to contribute to the establishment of a positive image of this people.[51] The emphasis of such translations is firmly placed on the necessity of 'familiarizing' the non-Roma with some crucial aspects of Romani culture.[52] Essentially, they represent an attempt to bridge the gap between two cultures which until now have rarely interacted with one another. They are therefore motivated by a general scope for intercultural communication, rather than by criteria of linguistic and lexical accuracy. Some authors openly admit the impossibility of translating accurately Romani concepts and images into the languages of the Gağe.[53] However, what the translation *can* effectively transmit to the Gağe is an image of the Roma which contrasts with the stereotypes of the 'Gypsy' as totally non-literate and culturally deprived.

Despite its dispersed nature, Romani written production is characterized by the unmistakable presence of a common identity, for which the *romani čhib* (as well as the oral tradition) are essential reference points. This is why Romani intellectuals particularly insist on the necessity of the diffusion of a common language.

In order to promote the unity of *romanes*, the intelligentsia tends to adopt a favourable attitude towards the teaching of their language to Romani children at school, as well as the teaching of the history of their people. As the Romani poet Charlie Smith has maintained, it is essential to 'make sure that our children are educated and fully aware of our people's history and to take our rightful place as equal citizens of Europe with equal rights and respect for our culture'.[54]

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[51] See for example Sergio Soravia, who translated the poems by Rasim Sejdić, as well as several Romani oral narratives, and Sergio Franzese, translator of Šemšo Advić's poems.

[52] On this use of the concept of 'familiarization' see Chapter 5.ii.

[53] Spinelli, personal communication.

[54] Quoted in Ian Hancock, Siobhan Dowd and Rajko Djurić (eds), *The Roads of the Roma* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 1998), p. 156.

Even though this issue is still highly controversial, it represents a substantial change in the traditional approach hitherto pursued by the Roma as regards formal education. The recent insertion of Romani mediators within Gağe's schools, together with the growing interest shown by international institutions for the situation of Romani schooling, are probably among the decisive factors that have led to this reversal of trend. In the eyes of the intellectuals, compulsory scholarization seems no longer a threat to the integrity of Romani heritage, but may actually function as an important means of consolidation and unification of Romani culture and traditions.

By the same token, the use of *romanes* in a written form, whether for literary or informational purposes, is strongly encouraged. The formation of an increasing number of Romani associations world-wide has meant also the launch of an impressive number of publications, periodicals and websites.[55] The web in particular is considered a precious vehicle for the collection and dissemination of information on the Roma, and it provides an invaluable (however virtual) network through which they are able to communicate with other Roma regardless of their geographical location.[56]

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[55] An impressive number of publications, papers and journals have been launched in order to overcome enduring linguistic and physical barriers and to promote a better knowledge of Romani history and culture. Some of them are characterized by an international diffusion, such as the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* (founded in 1888 and published in four series up to 1982, from 2000 known as *Romani Studies*), *Patrin*, *Informaciaqo Lil* and *Buhazi*; while others have a national circulation: *Le Tambour Tsigane* and *Monde Gitan* (France); *Amaro Gao*, *Dialogo Gitano*, *Los Gitanos en la Prensa*, *Nevipens romaní* (Spain); *Caravana* (Portugal); *Amaro Drom* and *Phralipé* (Hungary); *Romano Nevo Lil* and *Romipen* (Slovakia). Among the reviews devoted to the study of all the various aspects of Romani culture and society, besides the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* we may list *Études Tsiganes* and *Lacio Drom*. Specialized reviews are *Interface* (France), *Romi* (Spain), the *Boletin del Centro de Documentación* (Spain), *Traveller Education* (Great Britain) and *Traveller Economy* (Ireland).

[56] There are at least three typologies of Romani organizations: Romani associations (often supported by non-Roma), such as the following: *Comité de défense des Gens du voyage* e *Comité rom de Belgique* (Belgium); *Asociación española de integración gitana* (Spain); *Mustalaiskulttuurin Keskus Suomessa ry.* e *Suomen Mustalaisyhdisty ry.* (Finland); *Action sociale tsigane*, *Centre culturel tsigane*, *Comité international rom*, *Initiatives tsiganes* e *Office national des affaires tsiganes* (France); *Panhellenios Syllogos Ellínon Athingánon*, *Syllogos Tsiganon Anon Liossion*, *Syllogos Polyteknon Tsiganon*, *Politistikos Syllogos Flambourioton*, *Morfotikos Sylloghos Athinganon* (Greece); *Komiteto Romano ande Italia* (Italy); *Mincéitr Misli* (EIRE); *Foreningen for Sigøynernes Borgerrettigheter*

In this context the formation of a body of written literature is particularly encouraged. For the Serbian poet Rajko Djurić, himself a Rom, the emergence of a new Romani literature is symptomatic of the rise of a new 'national conscience', which is likely to make a fundamental contribution to its formation and consolidation.[57] Leska Manuš[58] defined *romanes* as 'the only wealth' of Romani people, the only unifying feature providing them with an effective means of ethnic affiliation. In this sense, as a strategy of ethnic self-affirmation and means of cohesion, writing is seen as an important resource to treasure and consolidate.

(Norway); *International romano Komitet*, *Landelijk Overleg Woonwagen Vrouwen*, *Lowaro Komitee* (Netherlands); *Zentralrat Deutscher Sinti und Roma*, *Bremer Sinti-Verein*, *Hamburger Rom und Sinti Union*, *Sindhi-Union Deutschland* (Germany); *Association of Gypsy Organisations*, *Romani Guild*, *National Gypsy Council*, *National Gypsy Education Council* (United Kingdom); *Nordiska Zigenarradet*, *Stockholms Finska Zigenarförening* ecc. (Sweden); *Radgenossenschaft der Landstraße* (Switzerland). There are also non-Roma associations (open to Roma), such as *Keree Amende*, *Vlaams Overlegorgaan Woonwagenwerk* e *Woonwagenwerk van Limburg* (Belgium); *Acción social gitana*, *Asociación national presencia gitana*, *Secretariato nacional de apostolado gitano* e *Asociación de desasrrollo gitano* (Spain); *Mustalaislahetys ry.*, *Suomen Evankelinen Romaanilähetys ry.* (Finland); *Groupement pour le droits des minorités*, *Ligue internationale contre le racisme et l'antisémitisme*, *Union nationale des institutions sociale d'action pour les Tsiganes* (France); *Centro Sociale Nomadi AIZO* e *Opera Nomadi* (Italy); *Trade Union Support Group for Travellers*, *National Comittee for Travelling People* (EIRE); *Katholieke Pedagogische Centra*, *Landelijk Woonwagen Werk* e *Lau Mazirel Fonds* (Netherlands); *Arbeitskreis Holocaust*, *Gesellschaft für BedrohteVölker* ecc. (Germany); *Minority Rights Group* e *National Council for Civil Liberties* (United Kingdom); *Statens invandrarverk* (Sweden); *Romani Union* (Switzerland). Finally, there are specialized research associations, among which the *Centre de recherches tsiganes* (Francia), the *Centro Studi Zingari* (Italy); the *Gypsy Lore Society*, the *Romano Istituto* (United Kingdom) and the *Romano Fondo-Purum* (Switzerland). For further information regarding Romani associations and their activities, see also the *The Patrin Web Journal Home Page*. 21 Jan. 2002. 11 Nov. 2002. <http://www.geocities.com/Paris/5121/orgs.htm>.

[57] Rajko Djurić, 'Gli inizi di una nuova letteratura', p. 175.

[58] Alexander Aledzunz Belugins (1942-1997), a Romani linguist, writer and poet that worked incessantly to promote the knowledge and the diffusion of Romani language.

(ii) The rise of Romani literature

To this day, no comprehensive critical study of Romani literature has been seriously attempted. There could be many reasons for this lack of attention, such as the newness and exiguity of this body of literature, as well as the absence of a 'prestigious' heritage. Moreover, we should consider the objective limitations in the diffusion and circulation of Romani written production: the publication of these texts, often scattered and almost inaccessible, is mostly due to isolated, sporadic initiatives by enlightened associations that promote the knowledge of Romani culture among the Gağe.[59] All these factors help to create what we may call the 'invisibility' of Romani literature, but besides such material, objective limitations that still prevent its diffusion and appreciation, there seem to be other, more subtle components to be taken into consideration.

The main reason why the written works by Romani authors have been generally 'invisible' and unknown to the Gağe is simply that nobody expected them to be there

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[59] Romani intellectuals are not the only ones to appreciate and encourage the publications of literary works in *romanes*. Giulio Soravia, whose studies on Romani language have been extremely influential, has recognized the importance of the development of a body of literary works for the unification of the Romani language: 'Even though still confined to a handful of dialects, the publication of literary works in Romani and the propagation of the language in written form may be a first step towards its unification and may lead to a deeper self-awareness among this people in search of itself. Today this movement is contributing to a transformation of the traditional, not always positive, image, of the 'Gypsy' (whether he be called a Tsigane, a Gitan, a Zigeuner, or a Cygan) with a view to his becoming a full member of modern society, strengthened by his culture and his capacity to communicate in his own language'. (Soravia, Giulio. 'A Wandering Voice: The Language of the Gypsies'). A project aimed at creating a 'Romani Library', starting in May 2003 and ending in March 2006, has been formulated and supported by a number of academic institutions, research centres, as well as European publishers and Non-Governamental Organizations. The project entails the selection and diffusion of literary works by Romani authors in a multilingual edition (30 volumes in 6 European languages), and has two main aims. Firstly, the Romani Library Project 'seeks to contribute to nurturing and reinforcing the cultural identity of Romani as a language of contemporary literature and in particular to encourage the younger generation to read and itself to write creatively'. Secondly, the project is an important attempt to fight against prejudice. From this point of view, making available across Europe works written by Roma can effectively contribute to 'enliven intercultural dialogue and to promote the recognition of Roma literature as an integral part of European and World literature and culture'. (*International Romani Writers' Association Home Page*. 05 Nov. 2002. International Romani Writers' Association. 9 Nov. 2002 <www.romaniwriters.com>the_romani_library.htm>).

at all. The use of writing for literary purposes, in fact, is not in accordance with the popular image of the 'Gypsies' as wild, primitive and therefore uneducated.

As shown earlier, the image of the Roma as 'people without writing' cannot be accepted, as it is grounded on a process of arbitrary generalization typical of the stereotype. For the same reason, the dismissal of Romani literature should be replaced with a less biased, open consideration of this neglected subject. As we will see in the following section, Romani writing is based on skilful research into the language and reference to a wide range of more 'consolidated' literary traditions. The time has come to look at these works with an open attitude that allows us to overcome the narrow, tenacious ties of prejudice.

The 'literary ostracism' surrounding Romani literature is strictly intertwined with the deep-rooted view of non-literate societies as intrinsically deficient in literary capacity, oral literature being considered of a lower standard if compared to written literature. In the Western, graphocentric perspective, 'proper' literature is invariably connected with writing, a belief that refers to the general conception of the written medium. Writing is implicitly associated with the development of 'higher' mental faculties, that is, the necessary precondition for the achievement of the psychic 'maturity' implied in the production of an artistic work. By implication, 'oral' and traditional arts are generally overlooked or even carelessly labelled as 'primitive' or 'ethnic'. Generally, we hardly resort to oral tradition, unless driven by a certain taste for the archaic, for a 'return to the origins', to a primordial sensibility. In fact, as G. R. Cardona has maintained, 'the production of literary texts does not begin exclusively after the establishment of a written code. There are therefore literary forms with and without, before and after writing'.[60]

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[60] G. R. Cardona, *I linguaggi del sapere*, p. 207; my translation.

In order to reach a better understanding of the works by Romani authors, we need to broaden our views on literature itself and its different manifestations. The etymology of the word is particularly informative here. The association of 'literature' with writing is evident from the very origin of the term, which derives from the Latin *littera*, that is, 'letter of the alphabet'. The idea of 'text' is also closely connected with writing, though, as Walter Ong has pointed out, 'text', from a root meaning 'to weave', is, in absolute terms, more compatible etymologically with oral utterance'.[61] By the same token, 'literariness' is generally considered to be a quality specifically concerned with the written texts. In the Humanist and Renaissance age, 'erudition' and 'cultivation' were to be achieved through the study of the *humanae litterae* (poetry, history, philosophy and all the disciplines concerned with the betterment of human beings). With the passing of the centuries, the term gradually came to acquire a more specialized meaning, covering a specific body of written works, some of which, such as the works of 'fictional' and 'popular' literature, lingered for a long time on the margins of the literary mainstream, the so-called 'canon'. Written poetry in particular has been considered as one of the most refined and 'literary' genres *par excellence*. Its technical and stylistic qualities, the subtle – sometimes hermetic – symbolism of poetic language have largely contributed to the image of poetry as one of the most sophisticated forms of expression of the human soul.

Contemporary literary theory has considerably broadened the once impenetrable boundaries of 'literariness'. Formal, extrinsic definitions of what is a 'literary' text – its technical content, its level of verbal and figurative virtuosity, which had traditionally dominated the field of literary theory, have recently been undermined

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[61] W. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 3.

and profoundly deconstructed. Despite these radical changes a great deal of skepticism and disbelief still surrounds Romani written production, and there seems to be an enduring resistance to grant these texts the appellation of 'literary'. The reference to a long-established and prestigious tradition is still regarded as the necessary prerequisite for a text to receive some critical attention. It is still the adherence to some canonical, well-identifiable patterns of composition that makes a work sound 'literary'.

Needless to say, the texts by Romani authors do not generally conform to these rigid canons: they are considered too marginal to be included within the boundaries of 'major', high literature, too 'engaged' and connected with orality to deserve the attention of the scholar, except for the folklorist or the anthropologist. For the purpose of this study, however, these features are of particular interest. Romani written literature may have appeared only recently, but different writing codes were already widely known and used by the Roma. Some Romani authors and artists have accomplished what the Gağe consider a 'prestigious *cursus studiorum*' and are well-known, highly respected intellectuals: their cultural background includes also knowledge of 'mainstream' literature and its 'canons'. More importantly, Romani literature is supported by a centuries-old oral tradition, whose *status* of 'literature' is undisputed, as scholars of oral literatures and cultures have abundantly demonstrated.[62] It is this fecund heritage that Romani authors constantly refer to and draw inspiration from. And it is only through the recognition of the relevance of this

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[62] See for instance Ruth Finnegan's *Oral Literature* and, as far as the Roma are concerned, the works by Milena Hübschmannová, Diane Tong, Marcel Courthiade and Jane Dick-Zatta.

tradition to Romani authors that we will fully appreciate the unique features of their creations.[63]

(ii.i) The rise of Romani literature: a general overview

A large number of Romani poets are from Eastern Europe (where the first Romani organizations were founded), especially from Russia, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia

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[63] The multifarious interconnections between oral and written literature are certainly worthy of a thorough investigation, which would be too vast to be satisfactorily treated in the present study. Let us here simply acknowledge the fact that some works by Romani authors are deeply influenced by the oral tradition and are specifically created to be set to music, and the poets tend to refer to their compositions as 'songs', *gila* (sing. *gili*). The fruitful integration of two kinds of textuality - the oral and the written - conventionally considered as incompatible, is particularly important. Oral composition does not necessarily 'precede' the written production on a sort of evolutionary line, as they actually coexist and continuously influence each other. The history of European culture amply testifies to the practice of creating written texts for public recitation well through the eighteenth century. Some crucial differences between oral and written texts are quite evident, such as stylistic variation connected to the passage from an aural to a visual dimension. The structure of a written text is not concerned with any need for memorization, and it relies on a different range of textual and rhetorical devices (the *hysteron proteron* or incipit in *medias res*, the use the formulaic style and the episodic structure of narratives). Reflecting on the specific features of the oral noetic process, Ong wrote: 'Oral memory works effectively with "heavy" characters, ... that is, heroic figures, not for romantic reasons or reflectively didactic reasons but for much more basic reasons: to organize experience in some sort of permanently memorable form.' (W. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 70). Other important differences between oral and written textuality relate to the diversity of genesis and diffusion of the texts, as well as their modes of fruition. An oral text is a proper *event* that is performed in a highly structured collective context, whereas a written composition is the outcome of the individual creation of an author whose readership is decontextualized. Despite the undeniable structural and stylistic differences, we may nevertheless affirm, using Soravja's words, that 'the different purposes involved in the production of writing and orality are in a sense complementary, and they partly meet the same needs.' (Giulio Soravia, 'La scrittura nel vento: di letteratura orale zingara e d'altro ancora', *Lacio Drom*, 2 (1991), 14-23 (p. 15); my translation). Orality and writing are not two separate domains, but are rather characterized by a continuous interaction, a dynamic interplay. In the case of Romani literature, for instance, the constant reference to the oral dimension is not intended as the use of a list of tropes or a repository of extrinsic textual effects. Instead of conceiving the tradition as the symbolic receptacle of worn out, stereotypical themes and images, Romani poets rely on it as a sort of stable reference point that places their works within the same 'literary trend'. The tradition also grants them the possibility to retain the links with a 'collective memory' within which to identify themselves while engaged in the search for new forms of literary expression: 'I believe that a poet cannot allow himself to conform to the well-worn norms of tradition, although, morally, he is duty bound to acknowledge the essence of his communal heritage, especially if it acts not as an impediment, a barrier, but as a source of inspiration, an aid to the imagination. If the works born of this inspiration can testify to the poet's sense of liberation, his love of the unusual, his intimate knowledge of the world.' (Karoly Bári, *To Be a Gypsy and a Poet*, in *The Hungarian Quarterly Homepage*. Spring 1997. 11 Nov. 2002. <http://www.hungary.com/hungq/no145/p3.html>).

The first author of poetry in *romanes* was a woman: Bronislava Wais (known as Papusza, that is, 'doll'), a Polish poetess belonging to the Polska Roma's group regarded as 'the mother of Romani poetry'.[65] Born in Poland in 1910, she learnt to write and to read without attending school and went through the painful experience of the military occupation of her country by the Nazi troops. She also partecipated actively in the war, fighting as a partisan, and after the war devoted herself to her literary activity. The poetry of Papusza, initially associated with the realm of orality and nostalgic recollection of the nomadic way of life, has been subsequently transcribed thanks to the intervention of Jerzi Ficowski, a Gağo poet who persuaded her to transcribe her poems in 1949. However, after just three years, Papusza was forced to give up her poetic activity, owing to the growing hostility to which she was subjected by her group. Due to her association with Ficowski (a supporter of governament policy for the sedentarization of the Roma in Poland) she was finally expelled from her community.

Another important poet, indicated by Djurić himself as the real 'pioneer of romani poetry in Serbia'[66] is Slobodan Berbeski, author of more than ten poetic collections and a prominent member of the Romani intelligentsia (Berbeski was the first president of the Romani Union).

Among the numerous Romani poets from former Jugoslavia, Jovan Nikolić is regarded as a promising hope of Romani literature. Nikolić was awarded an important literary Prize for his works in 1981 and subsequently published the collections *Dosti khatinendar/Gost Niotkuda* (The guest from nowhere; Vršac/Vîrset:

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[65] *The Roads of the Roma*, p. 154.
[66] See Djurić's article 'Gli inizi di una nuova letteratura', pp. 175-79.

Biblioteka Kov., 1982) and *Male Nočne Pesme. Cikne rjatune Đilja* (Little noctural songs, 1998). Iliaz Šaban published the collection *Memories of the immortals* and *The roots of my heart* (only in Macedonian version), and Seljajdin Salijesor is the author of *Dzivdipe maškaro Roma* (My life among the Roma, 1988).

As Djurić points out, there are numerous poets from Macedonia and Kosovo whose works testify to a generalized tendency among Romani authors to devise artistic expressions that are alternative to oral improvisation. Although these works are mostly ephemeral and their circulation is still restricted to the group to which the authors belong, they are nevertheless of great significance as meaningful evidences of a transition from the oral to the written world.

A great number of poets are from the ex-Soviet Union, where evidence of organized intellectual activities was initially to be found a few years after the October revolution. After the foundation of the Romani Union, the periodical *Nevo Drom* (New Road) saw its first publication, a Romani school was founded and the theatre *Romen* was established in 1931.

Among the exponents of the new Romani literature Djurić names also Alexandr V. Germano, Nina A. Dudarova, Nikolaj A. Pankov, M.V. Sergeyevskij, A.P. Baranikov, Olga Pankova, Michailo Bezliudsko, Nikolai Sakievic, Maria Polyakova, A. Germano and many others. These intellectuals are devoted to the diffusion of Romani culture and literature in the ex-Soviet Union. Some of them are established scholars, prose writers and poets whose activies range from magazine editing to linguistics studies, playwrighting and teaching. The poet Leska Manuš (pen-name of Alexander Belugin) is one of the most important of these scholars particularly devoted to the study of Romani language and culture. He has published numerous poems in the Italian review on Gypsy studies *Lacio Drom*.

Djurić's account also dwells upon the writer Matéo Maximoff, born in 1917 in Barcelona from father Rom Kalderash and mother Manuš. This prolific writer begun his activity after the tragic experience of World War II, during which he was confined in a concentration camp in Lannemezan until 1943. Maximoff published his first novel, *Les Ursitory*, in 1946, followed by many articles on the Romani tradition commisioned by the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*. After converting to the Pentecostal movement in 1961, Maximoff became an Evangelical pastor, combining his intellectual commitment with his religious activity. Among his novels are *Le prix de la liberté* (The price of liberty, 1955), *Savina* (1957), *La septième fille* (The seventh daughter, 1969), *Condamné à survivre* (Condamned to survive, 1984), *Vinguerka* (1984), *La poupée de Maméliga* (Maméliga's doll, 1986), *Dites-le avec des pleurs* (Say it with tears, 1990), *Ce monde qui n'est pas le mien* (This world which is not mine, 1992), *Routes sans roulottes* (Roads without caravans, 1993) and *Les gens du voyage* (The travelling people, 1995). He died at the age of 82.

In the Slovak Republic the Communist government constantly pursued an ethnocentric policy aimed at the complete assimilation of the Roma within mainstream society. A substantial increase in the level of scholarization among the Roma during the period following World War II, despite having a negative effect on the infra-generational trasmission of oral narration, led also to the rise of a literary written production. The Slovak Roma founded the *Union of Gypsy-Romanies* (*Zvaz Cikanov-romov*) in 1968, after the dramatic events of the Prague Spring, and their example was to be followed by the Roma of the Czech Republic in 1969. The Union's periodical, *Romano lil*, together with the numerous publications founded throughout the 1960s, contributed effectively to strengthen the links among the Romani population and to promote their ethnic and cultural awareness.

Djurić's overview could be further extended by including works by other Romani authors, such as Luminița Mihai-Cioabă, a talented poet and writer based in Sibiu (Romania). She is the author of a great number of literary works, especially poetry, short stories, tales and ballads. She published several collections of poems edited in various languages (*romanes*, English, Rumanian and German), such as *The Roots of the Earth* and *The Rain Merchant*,[67] as well as two plays and a collection of fairy tales. Her works display a sophisticated study of the Romani language, in the attempt of recreating themes and atmospheres presented as the 'roots' of Romani ethnic identity. As stated by Mircea Ivănescu

> her verses, which at first gave the impression that they had been scattered alongside the free racing of the pen, just marking and re-writing istant sensations the same way they are recorded in a teenager's diary – reveal a profound coherence, an intensity and a force that belong to genuine lyrics.[68]

As far as Romani poets and intellectuals in England are concerned, it is important to mention Ray Smith, author of the collection *One Hand Clapping* (Derbyshire: East Midlands Travellers' Publications, 1995), Ely Frankham, Josie Townley, Nathan Lee, Hester Hedges and Charles Smith. Among Australia's most distinguished Romani authors are Jimmy Storey and Norman Talbot, whose poetry has appeared in the poetic collections edited by Santino Spinelli[69] and has therefore been translated into Italian. As regards Romani poetry in the USA, the works by Nadia Hava-Robbins are of particular significance. After moving to the USA from former Czechoslovakia, she began writing poetry to 'explore [her] people's origin'. She is a

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[67] In these two collections Luminița Mihai Cioabă wrote the *romani* and the Rumanian version of the poems. Beatrice Ungar is the author of the German translation and Mircea Ivănescu edited the English translation.

[68] Cf. the introductory comment by Mircea Ivănescu to Luminița Mihai Cioabă's collection *O Angluno la Phuveako* (Sibiu: Editura Neo Drom, 1994), p. 13.

[69] An Italian Rom from the Abruzzi whose poetry will be examined in detail in Chapter 4.

member of the International Society of Poets and has authored several poetic collections.

This general survey, however provisional and far from exhaustive, is illustrative of the extreme variety of Romani literature, characterized by a high degree of linguistic heterogeneity. Among the literary works mentioned above, we note the predominance of bilingual collections (*romanes*/language of the 'host' country), although this dominant pattern is often altered by the insertion of additional languages.[70] We may also find a number of texts that are written exclusively in *romanes* (both in Romani dialects and in standardized *romanes*), as well as a large number of monolingual works in which Romani authors make use only of the 'dominant' language. This latter phenomenon in particular is worth further discussion. The tendency to adopt the language of the Gağe, far from being an index of acculturation, seems to be related to the attempt to oppose the stereotypes created by the non-Roma and to provide them with an alternative image of the Romani people. Such tendency is also detectable in the emphasis on controversial topics, for example the misconceived issue of Roma's nomadism and their alleged 'primitivism'. Authors also report writing in the language of the Gağe to demonstrate their knowledge of the dominant language and their ability to express themselves in a highly sophisticated way, or simply to grant their creations a patina of 'literariness'. To this purpose, the authors' predilection for the poetic genre is particularly significant. According to Romani authors, poetry is considered a sort of written manifestation of the traditional Romani *gili* (song), that is, a sort of embodiment (and re-invention) of the oral tradition in a written form.

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[70] See for example the multilingual edition of Luminița Mihai-Cioabă's poems and the collections edited by Spinelli, which will be analysed in the following section).

Poetry – especially *lyrical* poetry – is regarded by the Roma as the 'natural' way to express their feelings and emotions (not only their sadness, but all the aspect of their personal condition). As Paula Schöpf put it,

> virtually any Sinto/a is a potential poet and artist. The only reason why the majority Sinti don't write is the lack of time and the hardship of their daily lives (personal communication, 2003).

As far as the specific case of Romani poets in Italy is concerned, the widespread use of lyrical poetry could also be connected with the prestigious status enjoyed by this genre within the Italian literary tradition.[71] The strength of the lyric tradition within Italian culture had a remarkable influence on Italian Roma, whose literary works are characterized by the great occurrence of intertextual links with poets such as Foscolo and Leopardi.[72]

(ii.ii) Romani literature in Italy

The literary production in *Romani language* in Italy is experiencing a period of rapid growth and expansion. To date, the texts published are mostly collections of poems, especially miscellaneous volumes including works by non-Italian Romani poets. However, over the last twenty years, there has been interesting evidence of an 'indigenous' literary production by Italian Roma, whose main instances are to be found among the Roma from Abruzzi (especially Santino Spinelli and Luigi Cirelli), the Sinti (Paula Schöpf, Vittorio Mayer Pasquale, Olimpio Caro and Pućo), and the Slovenian-Croatian Roma.

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[71] In this regard, one cannot omit to mention the influential legacy of the aesthetic theory of Benedetto Croce, who identified poetry with the very essence of artistic creation.

[72] See in particular the poems by Santino Spinelli examined in detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

Initially, writing filtered into Romani culture by means of transcriptions of oral narration and testimonies given by Romani people; during the last few years this process has increased noticeably, and resulted in a written production that lends itself to a multiplicity of analyses. The importance of these transcriptions is remarkable, whether we adopt a linguistic and literary approach or we consider them from an anthropological point of view. Firstly, we should acknowledge the application of the written medium to the oral narration, a process which implies a code-shifting between spoken and written text, both of which are endowed with specific, irreducible characteristics and should be approached as distinct media of communication. Secondly, we should consider the interposition of a 'mediatior', that is, the transcriber, who is usually an exponent of non-Romani culture (but there are also transcriptions integrally produced by Roma).

The Italian journal *Lacio Drom* has published several transcriptions of tales, fiction stories, testimonies and authobiographical narration collected on different occasions and among various groups. These transcriptions (which are usually supplied with an Italian translation) are a frequent target of hostility, and the transcribers often meet with refusal from the Roma to grant permission for publication. The reason for this hostility is ascribable to the fact that such texts are not expressly conceived to be formulated in a written form, and least of all to be spread outside the community. Oral narratives convey contents which are 'ethnically connotated' and therefore essential to the group. For this reason they are carefully passed on and are traditionally kept *within* the domain of the group. The main function of this kind of narrative could be defined as 'pedagogic', as it is concerned with the handing down of knowledge from generation to generation, not to mention its crucial role in fostering cohesion among the members of the group. It goes

without saying that the removal of this cultural material from the original context, although aimed at promoting – rather than at deliberately endangering – the integrity of Romani culture, is often discouraged. The suspicions towards *a posteriori* manipulation of the content of oral narrative are certainly well-grounded, but they do not prevent completely the actual performance of transcription. On the contrary, transcriptions continue to be carried out, depending on the relationship between Romani narrator and Gağo transcriber. If this relation is grounded on mutual feelings of trust and esteem, the initial suspicion is likely to be easily overcome and even autobiographical accounts are entrusted to the non-Gypsy listener: this is the case of Giuseppe Levakovich's autobiography *Tzigari*, published in 1975, and Davide Halilovich's diary *Tema sulla mia vita* (An account of my life), which appeared in 1999. Another meaningful outcome of the positive collaboration between Roma and Gağe is the recent *I Kañjarija: Storia vissuta dei Rom Dasikhanè in Italia* (The *Kañjarija*: History of the Rom *Dasikhanè* in Italy), edited by Massimo Converso (national secretary of the *Opera Nomadi*) in collaboration with the associations *Opera Nomadi* and UNIRSI, together with the institution of the *Biblioteche Romane*.[73]

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[73] All the works mentioned above are published in Italian.

(ii.iii) Romani poetry published in Italy: its trends and internal differentiation

At a first glance, Romani literature published in Italy may seem to be too varied and fragmented to be coherently and systematically presented. There are, however, some specific features of this written production that allow us to identify a series of internal 'trends', which reflect the specific inclinations of the authors and their views on Romani culture. First of all, we may identify a series of works that seem to be particularly illustrative of what we may call the 'heart' of the Romani tradition. These works deal with the typical themes of what has been defined as the 'Gypsy *Weltanschauung*',[74] such as a passion for travelling, a sense of respect for mutual freedom, a love of nature, a spirit of initiative, a bold attitude toward life, contempt for hypocrisy and material goods (features that the Roma attribute to the Gağe), dignity of the elderly and their prestige and authority within the community.

The works by the Bosnian Rom Rasim Sejdić (1943-1981) could certainly be considered as highly representative of this trend. Sejdić, a gifted poet and narrator, had been writing poems since the age of fourteen. His family belonged to the Bosnian Xoraxané group. His first poems were in Serbo-Croatian, whereas the subsequent collections were published in *romanes* with an Italian translation (see, for instance, the collection *Rasim, poeta zingaro*, 1987). Sejdić's stories, transcribed and collected by Giulio Soravia, consist mostly of tales, stories of the dead, ghosts and vampires and fanciful tales (mostly published with an Italian translation in the journal *Lacio Drom*).

The poetry by Semso Advić, a well-known poet born in Banja Luka, could be

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[74] See Angela Tropea, 'Produzione letteraria scritta e trascritta', in *Lacio Drom*, 6 (1989), 40-42.

defined as a 'mirror' of the classical themes of Gypsy literature, but it also reflects the tragedy of war in ex-Jugoslavia, which sowed death and distruction among the Roma of that area. Advić published his first poetry collection in Italy in 1985. He participated in a poetic competition and was placed third with his *Poesie*. In 1993 he published the collection *Ratvaról iló romanó/Sanguina il cuore dei Rom* (Forlì: Forum Quinta Generazione). The essence of his poetry is to be found in the attempt to combine the search for linguistic refinement with a remarkable wealth and profundity of contents, which makes it one of the most significant manifestations of emerging Romani literature.

Santino Spinelli, a Rom from the Abruzzi, published two bilingual (*romanes*/Italian) collections of poems, *Gili Romani* and *Romanipè/Ziganità*, inspired by traditional themes of Romani literature. Musician, song writer and singer, but also teacher and member of the *Centro studi zingari* (Centre for Gypsy Studies) of Rome, Spinelli is a leading exponent of the Romani intelligentsia. In 1990 he established the cultural association *Thém Romanò*, and is the editor of the homonymous review, issued every three months. His interests and activities are particularly concerned with the study of Romani literature and culture, especially the Romani musical tradition. He is also a member of the Pedagogic Group for the education of Gypsy children in Europe.[75] His poems are generally pervaded with a deep feeling of sadness, which stems from a perception of radical incomprehension, from the Gağe's side, of Roma's reality. The poet's search for verses capable of transmitting suggestive images and enchanting musical effects is

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[75] *Interface* project, supported by the *Centre for Gypsy Research* of the University René Descartes and by the Commission of the European Communities.

accomplished by a skilful use of rhymes and assonances. The stylistic pattern underlying the poems is designed to evoke the traditional *gili romani*, the 'Romani melody', an artistic purpose of deep significance, if one considers that the author is a musician and a gifted composer.

In other Romani authors, the adherence to the traditional themes leads to a strong affirmation of the poet's ethnic identity, giving rise to a harsh polarization between the world of the Gağe and that of the Roma, separated by centuries of mistrust and misconceptions. Luigi Cirelli and Mansueto Levacovich, together with the main exponents of the written production by the Sinti (Vittorio Mayer Pasquale, Olimpio Caro and Pućo),[76] may all be ascribed to this trend.

Luigi Cirelli published his poems *Senza meta* (Without destination) in 1994, as part of the collection *Poeti e scrittori Rom*, edited by Angelo Arlati. His poems, generally presented only in the Italian version, are a poetic manifestation of the pride which arises from the awareness of his ethnic roots. The central theme of his poetry is the celebration of love, of emotion in all its infinite nuances: from sensual, physical love, to the spiritual feeling addressed to the figure of the mother, the personification of Nature, to a generic 'Gağo friend'. But the poet refers also to the narrow-mindedness and the hypocrisy of the Gağe, expressing a bitter complaint for the Roma's lost freedom and the attitude of indifference which surrounds his people. Throughout the poems there is a pervading attitude of tolerant openess toward the host society, in an effort to overcome the rigid dichotomy between Roma and Gağe. This poetry delineates an image of the Rom as man in the most meaningful and universal sense, that is, as man among other men, free to manifest his individuality

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[76] The poems by these authors have been published in the journal *Lacio Drom*.

and his uniqueness within the everyday disclosure of a passion for life.

In 1991 Mansueto Levacovich, an Istrian Rom whose father, Giuseppe Levakovich, entrusted the anthropologist Giulio Ausenda with his autobiography,[77] published the collection *Popolo mio dei Rom* (My Romani people) in Italian. These works represent the first evidence of a written production among the Slovenian-Croatian Roma living in Northern Italy. Levacovich's political activity is devoted to the promotion and the protection of the human and civil rights of his people. His poetry is characterized by a harsh denunciation of the complete lack of dialogue between Gağe and Roma, separated by an impenetrable barrier of hatred and prejudice. The poet's pessimistic view leads him to an invocation of death as the only solution to a never-ending chain of persecution and social marginalization suffered by the Roma since the beginning of their conflicting coexistence with the Gağe.

Finally, it is important to mention the written production by female Romani authors, such as Nada Braidic, Pamela Hudorovic and Paula Schöpf (also called Kiriassa, that is, Cherry), whose specific features are worthy of further analysis.

Poems by the Slovenian-Croatian Romni Nada Braidic have appeared in the anthology *Baxtalo Drom/Felice Cammino*, edited by Santino Spinelli and including the best compositions submitted to the artistic competition *Amico Rom*. Nada Braidic is a cultural mediator working and living in Udine, in North-Eastern Italy. Her compositions are an expression of the dichotomy between Roma and Gağe, featured as '*vuoto che uccide*' (emptiness that kills), and of racist exclusion from the main society. Beside the painful experience of the lack of human understanding

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[77] Published in 1995 under the title *Tzigari. Vita di un nomade* (Milan: Bompiani, 1975).

within the Gağe`s society, the poet also depicts her personal experience of loneliness and lack of communication within her group, which gives rise to a sense of profound frustration and isolation. It is this (veiled) reference to the condition of women within Romani society that distinguishes her poetry from that of her male counterparts. This is not to say that works by Romani female authors should be seen as simplistically opposed to those written by male authors. To a large extent, themes and aims are the same in both cases. However, what is typical of the 'female poetic voice' in Romani poetry is a sort of 'double consciousness', that is, a sense of exclusion from the dominant society aggravated by the marginalization experienced by women *within* their ethnic group. The poems by Paula Schöpf (who belongs to the group of the Sinti) are a clear example of this. A good number of her compositions, written in Italian, have been included in the already mentioned anthology edited by Spinelli. In her recent collection *La mendicante dei sogni* (Beggar of dreams, written in Italian), the poet expresses a pessimistic *Weltanschauung* characterized by the lack of communication between the Gağe and the Roma. More specifically, she highlights the situation of isolation and solitude experienced by women in her community. Her poetry is a remarkable example of a complex use of writing combining the effective denunciation of the abuses suffered by the Roma and the individual search for personal identity and self-expression.

(iii) Between tradition and innovation: the dual perspective of Romani literature

Earlier in this chapter, I have likened Romani literature to a 'polyphony' resulting from the dynamic combination of different voices and styles. This definition is in clear contrast with the common representation of the process of literary creation in traditional societies, according to which the art and literature in non-western societies are manifestations of a 'collective voice' and therefore devoid of any creative, original connotation. In reality, as the case of Romani literature testifies, features such as 'innovation', 'variation' and 'creativity' are not limited to the process of literary creation in 'advanced' societies. Far from being the monolithic manifestation of a supposed collective voice, Romani literature is an extremely complex phenomenon which defies any rigid categorization. This is immediately evident if we look at the endless manifestation of the writing process itself. Clark and Ivanič state this point quite firmly when they distinguish between the 'macro-purposes' and the'micro-purposes'of writing. According to these authors, writing can be used for a wide range of purposes, among which they mention the 'macro-purposes that writing serves in society at large' and the 'more specific, micro-purposes of achieving different kinds of social action that drive people to write in specific situations'.[78] While macro-purposes are concerned with the reproduction (or the challenge) of values and social practices of the dominant culture, the micro-purposes are closer to the aims of the individual writer and are therefore confined to more specific social situations. The list of possible micro-purposes is virtually endless, ranging from the desire to communicate with a friend to

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[78] R. Clark and R. Ivanič, *The Politics of Writing* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 108.

the completion of an academic assignment or the need to give voice to a personal experience. By focusing on the purposes underlying the act of writing, as the study by Clark and Ivanič demonstrates, one is urged to consider writing practices in connection with the larger social context, paying particular attention to writing as a site of struggle where dominant value and existing power relations may be confirmed or harshly contested. Although in this study we focus on the 'counter-hegemonic' macro-purposes of Romani literary representations, there are also many other aspects to be considered, such as the use of writing as a means of self-expression and manifestation of personal identity. A clear example of this differentiation is to be found among the Slovenian-Croatian Roma, where writing is mainly restricted to a female minority.

As for the other Romani groups,[79] among the Slovenian-Croatian Roma the acquisition of literacy skills does not imply the achievement of any effective form of power. However, literary practices allow their users to negotiate their identity and their personal needs, usually subordinated to community issues. Recent studies on the use of writing in this group have shown that while male authors – such as Levacovich – tend to use the written medium to give voice to political and social claims, female authors are more inclined to express their feelings and personality by means of their verse.[80] Through the written medium, Romani female authors seem to be able to carve out a 'personal space' for themselves in-between allegiance to their group of membership and their individual condition. In this particular case the purpose of writing is not the expression of collective issues, but is invested with personal values and views. In other words, the purposes served by writing are self-

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[79] On the functions of writing within Roma's social system, see Section 3.i.

[80] See P. Toninato, *L'uso femminile della scrittura fra i Roma sloveno-croati*, in *Italia Romani*, ed. by Leonardo Piasere (Roma: CISU, 1999), II, 147-168.

generated rather than imposed by a particular pattern of authority and power relations. This particular use of writing should not be considered a sort of idiosyncratic, purposeless activity, as it fulfils a very important social purpose: that of giving the individual a sense of being a 'citizen of the wider world, with whose other citizens one needs to exchange ideas, hopes and suffering', to use Gramsci's words.[81] Writing may be employed to create an 'interstitial' space within which the author is able to give voice to views that are not aimed at supporting mainstream ideologies, but refer to alternative values and needs. In this sense, the female use of writing could be seen as a crucial strategy of self-expression through which social constrictions, if not subverted, may be 'bypassed'.

The preceding survey has revealed the ample dispersion of Romani written literature, as well as the great variety of profiles of its exponents. As we have seen, variety and diversification are also characteristics of the Romani language and Romani people in general. The fundamental point is how to combine the desire for unity displayed by the intelligentsia with this extreme dispersion.

As maintained by Ian Hancock, himself a leading exponent of the Romani intelligentsia, 'The heart, the soul and the history of the Romani people are embodied in the Romani language'. The dispersal of the Romani group and the fragmentation of *romanes*, he insists, do not prevent the existence of the Roma as a people, which is based on a common heritage to which the Roma refer constantly, regardless of dialect variations and geographical dispersion:

> when Roma meet, it is our common heritage that binds us and that we seek out, not the variously acquired, non-Romani aspects of our culture and speech. It is our speech which is the greatest part of that heritage, end even among those populations whose Romani has been reduced to

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[81] Quoted in David Forgacs (ed.), *A Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988), p. 68.

> only a vocabulary, as in England or Spain or Scandinavia, it remains a powerful ingredient in Romani ethnic identity.[82]

Romani literature can certainly favour and strengthen the sense of a common identity among the Roma, as emphasized by Soravia:

> Even though still confined to a handful of dialects, the publication of literary works in Romani and the propagation of the language in written form may be a first step towards its unification and may lead to a deeper self-awareness among this people in search of itself. Today this movement is contributing to a transformation of the traditional, not always positive, image of the Gypsy (whether he be called a Tsigane, a Gitan, a Zigeuner, or a Cygan) with a view to his becoming a full member of modern society, strengthened by his culture and his capacity to communicate in his own language. [83]

The aspiration to internal unity is also strictly combined with the desire for external recognition. In his preface to the anthology of the Fourth International '*Amico Rom*' (Gypsy Friend) Arts Competition, Spinelli wrote:

> Cresce quindi l'*intellighenzia* romaní che esce dal buio del silenzio con la ferma intenzione di affermare la voce romaní con coraggio ed orgoglio sotto lo stimolo del duplice confronto costruttivo tanto interno al mondo romanó quanto esterno incontrando artisti Kaggé (non zingari) sensibilissimi e ricettivi.[84]

On the one hand, Romani literature performs a vital function – linguistic unification, formation of a sense of ethnic membership – *within* the domain of Romani culture. On the other hand, *as far as the non-Roma readership is concerned*, it provides Romani authors with the opportunity to challenge the stereotypical image of the 'Gypsies' as wild, uncivilized and non-literate by producing and propagating their self-representations. From this point of view the purpose of unification is almost twofold: the promotion and fostering of internal links and connections among

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[82] *The Roads of the Roma*, p. 18.
[83] Giulio Soravia, 'A Wandering Voice: The Language of the Gypsies'.
[84] 'The Romani *Intelligentsia* is growing, rising out of the darkness of silence with the firm intention of affirming the Romani voice with pride and courage in response to the dual stimulus of constructive confrontation, on the one hand internally, within the Romani world, and on the other hand externally, with sensitive, receptive Gadjo (non-Gypsy) artists' (translated into English by Sinead Ni Shuinear). Quoted from Santino Spinelli's *Presentazione*, in *Baxtaló Drom / Felice Cammino vol. III: Antologia*

the Roma appear to be inextricabily interwoven with the desire to open a dialogue with the non-Roma. Romani literature is situated at the symbolic intersection of these two apparently conflicting tendencies. It is therefore deeply characterized by a sort of 'dual' perspective that is reflected in the linguistic choices performed by the authors. This emerges clearly from the poetic collections of recent publications from which we have espressly drawn most of the material for this study. Generally, the Romani version of the poem is accompanied by a translation into languages such as Italian, English and so on; in many cases[85] the Romani version of the poem is not included, but is entirely supplanted in favour of other languages. As a consequence, works by Romani authors appear in an extremely varied linguistic form. The Romani poetess Nada Braidic, for example, reported writing in Italian in the first instance and *then* writing in Romani, claiming that the Italian language allowed her a richer lexical choice (personal interview 1997). This phenomenon seems to be in contrast with the emphasis put by Romani intellectuals on the preservation and diffusion of a common, unified language. In fact, there is no clash between these two phenomena, as they perform different functions within the dynamics of the Roma/Gağe relationship. While *romanes* plays a fundamental role in strengthening the links among the Roma, European languages (especially English) seem to be best suited to the relations with the Gağe. The choice of adopting the languages of the Gağe is clearly connected with the need to reach as many readers as possible (mostly non-Roma) in order to propagate and foster a better understanding of Romani culture, whereas the use of Romani is usually associated with issues of internal

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delle migliori opere del 4° Concorso Artistico Internazionale "Amico Rom" (Thèm Romanó: Lanciano, 1997), pp. 9-12 (p. 9).

[85] See for example the poems by Mansueto Levacovich, Paula Schöpf, as well as a great number of poems included in the anthology *The Road of the Roma*.

cohesion and linguistic unity.

In addition to these manifest targets, signified by the authors' decision to use either *romanes* or the language of the Gağe (or both) and by the focus on issues of Romani culture and identity, there is also another – more indefinite – recipient to be mentioned. While it seems reasonable to infer that texts written in the language of the Gağe are expressly conceived and shaped for a Gağe readership (as has been often remarked on by the authors themselves), it is worth noting that, once they are given a written form and made public, texts may be subjected to all sorts of possible readings and interpretations. From this point of view, the identification of two main forms of readership on the basis of language choices is certainly useful, but should not overshadow the fact that Romani literary works are 'open works' (to use Eco's words) whose uses and subsequent transformations are largely unpredictable. Ideally, the readership addressed by the Roma should be formed by Roma and by Gağe who are willing to lay the basis for a more constructive confrontation with their people. This is particularly clear in the case of intellectuals such as Hancock and Spinelli, who have constantly pursued the establishment of a dialogue with the Gağe. In contrast to this attitude, there are also poets who seem to address the Gağe in a negative, sometimes aggressive fashion (e.g. Mansueto Levacovich and Paula Schöpf). The nihilistic *Weltanschauung* expressed in their poems could be considered as a poetic *cri*, an extreme act of protest and denunciation which is unlikely to give rise to a dialogic exchange. On other occasions, the intentions of the poet are more difficult to detect: the purposeful reference to a specific readership (e.g. the participation in artistic and literary competitions) may be perceived as transitory and 'instrumental', and the poet may subsequently chose to 'withdraw' in him/herself or to start regarding his/her writing as a private matter. The example of

Nada Braidic is particularly significant in this regard: after her successful participation in the competition *Amico Rom* (she was awarded the first prize in 1994), she has gradually ceased to publish her poems. This does not necessarily mean that she has simply 'forsaken' poetry: for her, writing remains an important means of self-expression, but it has undergone a drastic change in its context of usage (from the public to a more private dimension).

The complex – sometimes contradictory – features highlighted above clearly demonstrate how Romani literature is not simply the unstructured creation of a 'primitive' people, but a multifaceted phenomenon which it is impossible to encapsulate in a rigid scheme. On the other hand, this complexity should not create the impression that there are no common threads connecting the works of Romani authors. In particular, the fact that a great number of these works are not presented in the Romani version does not seem to prevent their correct identification by the public; in the eyes of authors and editors their *Romanipè* (the core of Romani specificity and distinctness) is not in question. Language choices of this kind may contribute to cast some light on the crucial issue of authenticity and cultural identity, which will be further discussed in the next chapters. In the introduction to the recently published collection *The Roads of the Roma*, Ian Hancock writes:

> In this volume, the writings of thirty authors have been brought together in a PEN anthology of the literature of the Roma, as one in its *Threatened Literatures* series. Over half was originally written in Romani, with versions by their authors in different European languages, including Polish, Italian, French and German. And *while those presented here are for the most part in English translation, their spirit has nevertheless been successfully maintained.*[86]

Where could the so-called 'spirit' of Romani literature be found? What qualities

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[86] *The Roads of the Roma*, p. 9; my emphasis.

should be identified as 'typical' of Romani writing? 'Musicality' and 'passion' are frequently considered the most distinctive features of Romani literature. Essentially, Romani authors are appreciated for their supposed capacity to transfer into their writing the passion and the musical intonation which are thought to best epitomize the Romani soul. In the preface to Luminița Mihai-Cioabă's collection *O Angluno La Phuveako* we read:

> What distinguishes her [...] is, first of all, the purity of musical intonation she has inherited as a representative of an ancient ethnie originating in India. [Her] poetry has an intensive dramatism, with a tragic flow.

There are no reasons why aspects such as the use of dramatic images and the search for musical effects should not be considered as key features in the reading and interpretation of Ms Cioabă's poems. The fact is, these features are here presented as arising 'naturally', almost 'spontaneously' from the pen of the poetess. Passion, poetics and musical talent are considered as part of an 'innate' heritage handed down from generation to generation among the Roma. Clearly, this view is too simplistic to be granted heuristic utility. All in all, depictions of the Roma's written production as a generic manifestation of the 'Gypsy soul' risk to encourage the revival of well-known, obsolete stereotypes. Instead of casting some light on the emergence of Romani literature and its implications on the social context, this view subsumes Romani literature under the label of the picturesque and the romantic, giving rise to a form of aesthetic reductionism that resembles another re-enactment of the notorious 'fictional Gypsy'. Any interpretation of the Romani written production should carefully avoid any (more or less explicit) attempt at literary exoticization. There are no specific, concrete 'qualities' or 'essences' whose possession authorizes the qualification of a text as 'Romani poetry'. The emphasis here should be put on the communicative, pragmatic function of the poetic language and images, rather than on

the alleged picturesque qualities of the 'Gypsy' soul. The analysis of poetic texts in the light of the general context of the relations between Roma and Gağe will give us some useful indications as regards socio-political aspects of the use of the written medium, which are usually overlooked.

As we have seen, writing can be used both for 'conservative purposes', that is, to consolidate and preserve some aspects of one's culture and identity, and also to denounce social discrimination and to challenge well-established, denigrating stereotypes. If we look at poetry by Romani authors from this perspective, it is undeniable that one of its main features is represented by its counter-hegemonic function, to which we refer in the next chapter as the 'agonistic vocation' of Romani literature. I will argue that Romani poets tend to situate their works within a dialogic frame and, more specifically, in connection with the hegemonic discourse elaborated by the Gağe on their regards. The efforts of the poets seem primarily directed to the search for an autonomous voice whose identity has been obscured by the fictitious representations of the host societies. This does not mean that every aspect of Romani poetry is utterly subordinated to counter-hegemonic aims. Romani authors are far from neglecting the vigorous call of their lyric inspiration or the evocative use of the language; as we will see, a great part of this literature denotes the experienced use of technical and rhetorical skills by the writers. What lies at the very heart of their compositions, however, is the constant reference to a condition of oppression and discrimination perpetrated against the Roma. I propose to adopt this specific feature as the thread running through the scattered body of Romani written production.

The discussion of the social functions of Romani writing leads us also to a brief reflection on the nature of the dialogic frame in which hetero-representations of the 'Gypsies' and self-representations by Romani poets confront each other. At first

glance, one would be tempted to encapsulate this confrontation in a binary opposition, an insurmountable contrast between mutually exclusive terms. Indeed, the centuries-old Gağe-Roma relationship has been constantly represented as a radical difference between 'civilised' society and a wild, rebellious minority. This seems to be confirmed by the cognitive mechanism at the root of the Western conception of cultural, ethnic and individual identity: the opposition to an Otherness. The limitations of this approach are evident: the reduction of the relation between cultures to an antithesis leads to a sterile contraposition, with a loss of meaning for both terms of the confrontation. In order to appreciate the hybrid features of the textual representations analysed here, as well as the importance of their multiple interrelationships, a more complex approach is needed. As will be shown, textual images and symbolic meaning cannot be neatly defined and separated from one another, as they are built on an elaborate web of reciprocal influences and cross-references. The adoption of this dynamic pattern of interrelations is the key to a better understanding of the different writing practices adopted by the Roma and, more importantly, provides the basis for a different conceptualization of the whole Roma-Gağe relationship.

As analysis of the writing practices adopted by the Roma has revealed, this group is characterized by a diversified use of the written medium that the misleading label of 'people without writing' has simplistically overlooked. In fact, the relation of the Roma with writing is far more profound and sophisticated. In order to appreciate the manifold aspects of this relation, we need to consider the Roma's written production in the light of the larger socio-cultural context, which obviously includes the relationship with the Gağe. It is primarily to refute the representations devised by the

Gağe in their regards that the Roma seem to be gradually shifting from an attitude of 'strategic avoidance' and 'restriction' of writing to a small minority towards a more active involvement in writing practices. The features of these practices are almost twofold. As the emergence of a Romani intelligentsia indicates, the use of writing is devoted in the first place to 'counter-hegemonic purposes' and to claiming full recognition in terms of human and minority rights protection. Besides, writing practices are concerned with the search for internal unity, as testified by the pursuit of linguistic standardization of *romanes* and the strenghtening of extensive links among the Roma. These multiple tendencies are not separated and clearly distinguishable, but cohexist and interact dynamically even within the same author.

In the dynamic tension between adherence to the tradition and signs of innovation lies the fundamental feature of Romani literature. On the one hand, the establishment of a dialogue with the Gağe involves a range of innovations within the communication strategies of the Roma that are likely to bring about substantial changes within their socio-cultural system. On the other hand, these innovations appear to play a major role in the retrieval and the restoration of 'Romani traditions', as well as establishing a sense of shared identity based on a communal heritage. These complex dynamics amply reverberate throughout the body of Romani literature and are detectable within the specific linguistic features and the stylistic patterns of the compositions.

In the following chapter I will examine in detail how the authors try to convey and harmonize in their poems the multiple, disparate sources of their inspiration, unfolding a symbolic space where hetereal, indefinite visions blend with violent images of past sorrows and poetic metaphors are grevious reminders of the present oppression of the Romani people.

4 'FROM THE SIDE OF THE NATIVES': ROMANI TEXTUAL AUTO-REPRESENTATIONS

The rise of an 'authocthonous' literature amongst the Roma may be a recent phenomenon, but the source of its inspiration is deeply rooted in Romani history and culture. Until now, however, the relevance of this literature has not been fully acknowledged. As already seen in the previous chapters, images inspired by Romani people had remarkable influence over a great number of Gağe authors and artists. This centuries-old fictionalization and romanticization of Romani characters has contributed to forge the image of a people by definition 'poetic', but such an intrinsically lyrical quality was the result of a process of 'poetic objectification'. In other words, the poetic connotation of the 'Gypsies' was mainly due to the fascination and idealization of a nomadic, mysterious lifestyle, a view that has completely overshadowed the reality of discrimination and persecution suffered by this people. As for their status of *creators* of poetry, Romani authors are usually neglected and their works are carelessly labelled as 'primitive', or simply confined to the domain of folklore.[1] By the same token, when it comes to the aesthetic appreciation of their works, it is Romani people as a whole that are entrusted with some sort of 'aesthetic temperament', not the single artist. The concept of individual authorship regarding these authors is generally overriden by the idea of a generic heritage passed down from generation to generation and considered as the outcome of a collective consciousness.[2] Doomed to be perpetually associated with poetry and

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[1] This enduring attitude, connected with the conviction that Romani culture is on the brink of 'extinction' and therefore needs to be preserved and catalogued, dates back to the nineteenth century, when a number of scholars and 'Gypsiologists' devoted themselves to the study of 'Gypsy' music, dance, magic and religion, language and oral tradition.

[2] This is in line with the general view on the so-called 'primitive' societies, traditionally regarded as refractory to the expression of individual and critical thought. On the critique of this view, see in

fiction but never subject of their own 'poetic nature', the Roma seem to be victims of a spell that makes them prisoners of a frozen, misconceived image. The recent emergence of a Romani written literature has partially reversed their condition of passive bearers of aesthetic qualities.

This chapter provides an account of the main themes and tropes detected in Romani literature, as well as an analysis of the unique features of this literary production. The first two chapters of this study aim to present a number of images which are highly representative of the Gağe's construction of the 'Gypsies'. The aim of these chapters is to highlight the representational paradigm underlying the images of the 'Gypsy', not to provide a systematic, detailed account of such images. By the same token, this chapter does not focus on any specific Romani literary tradition, but is concerned with a number of themes and images which are central to the Romani identity in general. My analysis aims to shed some light on the function of Romani images and self-representations with a strong ethnic connotation. As in the case of the Gağe's representations, the images selected – though 'fictional' and 'constructed' – help us identify the Roma's response to the stereotypical depictions of the Gağe and represent a sort of 'writing back'. In addition to this 'counter-hegemonic' function, however, the representations evoked in this chapter perform a more 'constructive' function, which includes the establishment of a common identity among the Roma (as we will see in the case of the Romani intellegentsia), as well as the use of writing for 'personal' purposes (which can be found especially in Romani women's writing). As we will see, Romani poetry seems to be rooted in two different realms: the realm of the universal and that of social reality. On the one

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particular A. Cohen, *Self-consciousness: An Alternative Anthropology of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994).

hand, this poetry is concerned with the themes and symbols that pertain to all humans, such as the eternal battle between good and evil, heaven and earth, life and death. On the other hand the Romani poet is charged with a precise 'mission', that of 'breaking the spell' against her/his people, that is, of challenging the enduring attitude of mistrust and hostility towards the Roma. 'To be a Gypsy [...] and a poet is a tall order; it means a solemn commitment to fight exclusion and hate', remarked Károly Bari.[3] This profound sense of commitment has greatly contributed to inspire and shape the dominant features of Romani literature. Romani poets do not limit their *gila* to the purpose of linguistic experimentation or the manifestation of their lyrical self. Rather, they regard their activity as a proper 'mission', a duty to carry out with the utmost zeal in pursuit of what they call 'the Romani truth'. This mission has at least two important facets, which could be named respectively the *pars destruens* and the *pars construens* of the act of writing.

In order to bring Romani self-representations to light, it is first necessary to deconstruct the false images created and diffused by the Gağe. To this aim, writing provides the means to oppose the Gağe's attempt to negate and dispossess the Roma of their identity and secondly, it contributes to strengthen the sense of group membership. As we will see, such critical deconstruction has been pursued primarily by presenting the reader with some insight into the reality of discrimination and persecution to which the Roma are constantly subjected. In particular, this is achieved through the enhancement of the role of history within the poetic discourse, since a demistified analysis of the historical Gağe/Roma relationship is absolutely crucial to the representations of the Roma as a 'real' people with concrete features and needs. Deconstruction and demistification, though, represent only one aspect of

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[3] See Karoly Bári, *To Be a Gypsy and a Poet*.

the complex dynamics of negotiation and affirmation of Romani ethnic identity and should therefore be supplemented with the analysis of the 'constructive' side of this process, which concerns the creative definition of the *Romanipé* – what lies at the heart of Romani life and culture. The final section of the chapter is aimed at highlighting the crucial role played by Romani written literature in this creative process of self-definition in the context of the enduring struggle for the control over Romani identity.

(i) Breaking the spell: the agonistic vocation of Romani literature

The Gypsy from India[4]

I go looking for Gypsies
in the olive grove
because I was told
they were turned into dogs.

I am an Indian Gypsy woman
and learned from Kali
the justice of logic,
the romance of magic.

I predicted your futures
throughout the centuries.
I developed the cures
for your sick mules and donkeys.

But the time has come
to honour my people,
and free them from
the evil spell that

I will break with the spell I make.
They won't be dogs any more,
they will be what they were,
they will return to being the Roma –
Gypsies, as you would say.

Nicolas Jimenes Gonzalez

The generalized attitude of distrust and hostility with which the Roma are confronted daily had profound repercussions on the formation and the inspiring principles of this literature. A poet who is also a Gypsy, as we will see in this section, is highly inclined to identify with the condition of exclusion and discrimination suffered by his/her people. For him/her, writing becomes a form of intervention in the arena of social struggle, and poetry itself represents a form of action, of concrete protest and denunciation. From this perspective, poetry could be defined as a sort of linguistic *performance*.[5] How to situate this conception of literature in relation to Western views on poetry? As Peter Levi put it, 'in principle, poetry can do whatever

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[4] From I. Hancock, S. Dowd and R. Djurić (eds.), *The Roads of the Roma*, p. 49 (trans. from Spanish by T. Fugalli).

[5] This view is quite different from the picturesque interpretation of poetry with which the 'Gypsies' are traditionally associated.

the language can do: a poem is nothing more than someone's particular human speech'.[6] Nonetheless, the poetic utterance is clearly distinguishable from everyday, ordinary speech: there is something 'unique' in the human voice of a poet. Where is this uniqueness to be found?

For a long time, European popular imagery has been largely dominated by the Romantic stereotype of the poet as a particular kind of man, able to 'see' reality from a particular, almost 'visionary' perspective, and to express this reality through the magic alchemy of the verses. In this sense, poetic art has been considered for a long time as a sort of gestaltic apprehension of reality, an aesthetic 'illumination'. Some poets consciously tried to plunge themselves into the deepest recesses of the human soul in their search for this privileged *poietic* state: the poet must be a visionary, wrote Rimbaud.[7] Such pursuit of the poetic 'epiphany' entails a condition of solitude, homelessness, if not of curse: at the mercy of his powerful, unruly genius - a sort of reification of the psychic power of poetic inspiration, the poet was doomed to dwell at the margins of human society. Gradually, the poetic realm grew apart from everyday reality and began to be characterised by the use of a hermetic, highly figurative form of language.

A number of critics maintain that what distinguishes poetry from everyday language is the particular form in which language is shaped within the poems. They identify the specificity of poetic language with the technique of 'defamiliarization' applied to the ordinary language, encouraging a formalist conception of poetry as a 'special kind of discourse'.[8] The formal structure is undoubtedly a crucial aspect of a literary work, and it is largely responsible for its poetic efficacy and resonance. But

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[6] P. Levi, *The Noise Made by Poems* (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1977), p. 58.
[7] See Rimbaud's letter to Paul Demeny (Charleville: May 15th, 1871).
[8] See especially the Russian Formalists.

technical, extrinsic properties alone are not enough to define what poetry is. To dwell exclusively upon the textual dimension of a poem would overshadow the fact that a poem is also a linguistic event and is enacted in a specific social context. The social function of a work of art is inextricably interwoven with the social nature of language. For this reason, even when it seems self-referential, poetry is always a *communicative* event.

In my perspective, the constitutive feature of poetry is not to be confined to the spiritual condition of its creator, or in some kind of alchemic use of language. Poetic words are not endowed with an intrinsic quality, a sort of 'ontological priority' over ordinary language: they do not refer to a metaphysical dimension inaccessible to ordinary human beings. Poetry can embrace virtually *any* aspect of reality (poetic forms are 'cannibalistic', Levi would have said) through a linguistic form. In other words, there is no absolute, predetermined restriction on what should be considered 'poetry' and who should be regarded as a 'poet', because any definition of this sort is bound up with a specific historical and cultural context. In the case of Romani poets, they tend to adopt an 'instrumental' approach to poetry, which is also consistent with the general pattern of Romani literacy. This is not to say that their poetry should be regarded as virtually devoid of any aesthetic value, but simply to acknowledge the particular emphasis placed by these authors on their activity of engaged intellectuals.

According to a long-lived view of poetry whose first manifestation can be found in classical antiquity, it is the capacity of both teaching *and* delighting, emphasized since its first appearance, that distinguishes and qualifies a work of poetry.[9] Not only does poetry appeal to the emotions of its readers and is capable of transmitting some

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[9] I refer in particular to Horace's formula '*utile dulci*' (*Ars poetica* III 333-4) and Lucretius's didactic poetry.

form of aesthetic pleasure; it can also guide a man's actions and inspire his thought. Far from being disconnected and separate from one another, the two aspects (the technical as well as the pedagogical, performative content) coexist and contribute to qualify poetry itself.

What seems to characterize most of Romani literature is its focus on key social issues so far deliberately evaded and neglected, its attempt to unveil what lies beneath the misleading features of the 'fictional Gypsy'. The goal of these poets is therefore not just to 'entertain' and 'captivate' the readers – as most Gağe would probably expect from them as 'natural performers' – but to *provoke* and *awaken* public opinion to the continuous injustices suffered by the Roma. By saying this we do not intend to contend that a Romani poet is assumed to be 'committed' *because* of his/her identity, as this would be too reductive.[10] It is nonetheless possible to identify some features within the body of Romani literature that are closely connected with what we named as its 'agonistic' vocation. The term agonistic derives from the Greek word *agon* and evokes the ceremonial, competitive context in which epics, plays and odes were performed in classical times. Here, the term is used to highlight a fundamental aspect of verbal composition: its being performed to an audience. As Ruth Finnegan states, a work of oral literature has no existence without its actual performance, and it is greatly affected by the composition of the audience and the social situation in which is enacted. The same seems to apply to Romani literature, which, though not rigidly motivated by political, instrumental and didactic purposes, is manifestly oriented towards a specific audience. In this respect,

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[10] The notion of engagement derives from the theory of '*littérature engagée*' (committed literature), elaborated by Jean-Paul Sartre in the influential essay *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948). According to Sartre, writing necessarily implies an 'engagement' and the written word represents an action whose main purpose is to 'reveal' the world in order to bring about change in society.

such literature has maintained – in some cases obviously more than in others – a close link with the performative nature of the oral tradition. A large number of factors seem to validate this assumption: they concern the particular range of linguistic choices underlying this literature, as well as its stylistic and thematic characteristics, which will be examined in the following pages.

An obvious precondition for the establishment of a written literature is the existence of a literate readership, but in the case of the Roma this precondition is still far from being fulfilled. This fact raises some crucial questions about the aims and the destination of Romani literature. The authors' decision to adopt in most occasions languages others than *romanes* is extremely informative in this regard.[11] The works by Romani authors, we are led to think, address mainly (even though not exclusively) a public of non-Romani readers. After being for centuries the object of innumerable literary representations, the Roma are now providing their own version of the story: a story of prejudice and discrimination and, above all, a story of mystification. 'Indeed, the representation of "Gypsies" as fiery and romantic vagabonds is enjoyed in no small way by the Rom themselves, both for its colourful image and for the gullibility of the gaje (non-Rom) it helps to underline', wrote Ian Hancock.[12] It is chiefly against such unrealistic depictions that Romani authors direct their efforts. This is not to say that Romani literature should be considered only in negative terms, as a sort of belated 'retaliation' or a mere counter-representation. These texts serve a wide range of purposes, especially as compensation for the growing lack of communication among Romani groups and the development and diffusion of a common Romani language, as we have seen in the

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[11] See Sections 3.ii and 3.iii.

[12] See Ian Hancock, 'Na Achel Amari Cungar', *Roma*, 7 (1983), 11-14 (p. 11).

previous chapter. It is undeniable, however, that one of the main features of this literature is to be found in its strong commitment to embody the voice of a marginalized, silenced people. As in the case of other literatures by 'oppressed' and 'persecuted' people, Romani written literature testifies to a strenuous struggle to resist the risk of cultural assimilation within the mainstream society. It is an example of 'resistance literature' that emerged in a context of harsh struggle over textual and cultural meaning. It reacts to an 'aesthetics of oppression' extraneous to Romani culture and *Weltanschauung*.[13]

Romani poets openly reject the stereotypes and fallacies conveyed by the 'aesthetics of oppression' by forging an alternative aesthetics: that of resistance and denunciation (the aesthetics of 'human struggle for total liberation', in Ngugi's words). The central functions of such aesthetics are the diffusion of alternative, neglected aspects of Romani life and culture, as well as the denunciation of the devastating impact of anti-Gypsy stereotypes on the social context and, more precisely, their consequences for the Romani people.

(i.i) The curse of exclusion

Since their first appearance in Western Europe, the physical features of the Roma (the colour of the skin in particular) have been the object of superstitious beliefs. Traditionally, black colour denoted inferiority and was surrounded by a negative symbolism, as already seen in Chapter 1. During the Middle Ages, the blackness of

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[13] The definition 'aesthetics of oppression', devised by 'Ngugi wa Thiong'o, is quoted from Barbara Harlow, *Literature of Resistance* (New York; London: Meuthen, 1987), p. 32.

the 'Gypsies' was interpreted as a sign of their evil nature and their 'primitive' condition. Subsequently, this feature has been regarded as the consequence of a degeneration from a 'pure' race into a corrupted one, a 'deviation' to be abhorred and exterminated. At present, discrimination on racial grounds is still largely exploited to exclude the Roma from majority society, reducing cultural diversity to biological difference. Racial categories - as well as cultural and ethnic ones - are quite efficient in creating segregation and division among cultures. The exploitation of biological characteristics, in particular, has frequently functioned as a strategy to sanction and justify social, economic and political inequalities as grounded in allegedly natural, incontestable facts. Categorization based on definitions of 'race', however culturally constructed and lacking in historical foundation, has serious repercussions on social reality and greatly contributes to forge the hegemonic discourse on minority groups. More importantly, this categorization entails a vision of the Other as 'radical', absolute Alterity, precluding any form of intercultural exchange and creating the impression of an insurmountable Roma/Gağe dichotomy grounded on biological difference.

Alaina Lemon provides us with a pertinent representation of the dynamic interplay between the hetero-ascription of racial traits to the Roma and their internalization. In this regard, the anthropologist reports the words of a Kelderari welder: "'We are *negry*," he told me. "We are treated like a second class here, like your blacks in America.'"[14] According to the anthropologist, this form of identification is used by the Roma, especially by the younger generations, to give a positive connotation to

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[14] A. Lemon, *Between Two Fires*, p. 75.

their diversity:

> since America was culturally positioned by many post-Soviets as "better than Russia" (materially better off, more civilized), the youth could reverse the local valence of blackness and thus of Gypsiness: Roma, if more like American blacks (and thus more like Americans), must be "better" than Russians, all the more for being "black."[15]

This example highlights the extraordinary complexity of the category of 'blackness'. As for other categories concerning the definition of identity, the ascription of blackness appears to be strictly contextual and is therefore likely to assume a number of conflicting connotations. Far from being clear-cut and immediately evident, the 'black' trait is extremely difficult to define and can be situated along an ideal *continuum* within which auto and hetero-ascriptions incessantly overlap and intermingle.

A further conception of blackness may be found in a wide range of lyric compositions, such as the poem 'I was born in black suffering' by Iliaz Šaban.

I WAS BORN IN BLACK SUFFERING[16]

Oh yes, that's me all right
tramping along the road
barefoot, ravenous –
and on bad days
the wind blows
rain pours
and there's nowhere for me to shelter …

Why did you bring me in the world, mother dear?
you bore me to a life of black suffering
maybe you gave birth to me on a dark road like this
my lips tremble, rain soaks me through
and there's not even you, dear mother, to see me.

In this poem the black colour is seen *tout court* as a metaphoric expression epitomizing the existential condition of the Romani people. This symbolic

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[15] A. Lemon, *Between Two Fires*, pp. 75-76.
[16] From *The Roads of the Roma*, p. 77.

transposition is particularly meaningful, as it indicates a substantial change of cultural paradigm concerning the image of the black 'Gypsy'. In the eyes of the Gağe, the 'Gypsy' diversity is attached to a biological quality and is considered a reified object to repress and stigmatize. In Šaban's poem, by contrast, blackness is not presented as an objective, tangible feature, but as an existential one. Devoid of any biological content, blackness can be internalized by the author and its poetic expression acts as a painful testimony of the Gağe's cruelty. In a similar fashion Aimé Césaire, who first devised the term 'Négritude',[17] opposed black subjectivity to its racial objectification: 'j'accepte [la négritude], non plus un indice céphalique, ou un plasma, ou un soma, mais mesurée au compas de la souffrance...' (I accept [negritude], no longer cephalic index, or plasma, or soma, but measured by the compass of suffering).[18] Šaban's poem also begins with an act of self-recognition (Oh yes, that's me all right / tramping along the road) and has its focus in the identification of the Romani life with suffering and social exclusion. It is essential to note that the condition of profound alienation described in these poems is due to a socio-political factor: the discrimination practices adopted by society towards the Roma. To this poet, the reason for the exclusion of the Roma from mainstream society is not rooted in a biological dimension, but is the result of social marginalization to which his people subjected.

Šaban's conception of blackness introduces a new view of Romani identity as

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[17] The term 'Négritude' was first introduced by Martinican poet Aimé Césaire in the 1930s to affirm the existence of a common identity of the African people throughout the world. Since its formulation, the concept was to become the centre of a complex literary and ideological movement in favour of the revalorization of black identity and culture. Among the leading figures animating the debate about this concept are Frantz Fanon, André Gide, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Leopold Senghor and Eduard Glissant.

[18] A. Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, ed. and trans. by Abiola Irele (Ibadan: New Horn, 1994), p. 23.

opposed to the long-held version of the Gağe, who tried to reduce this diversity to a biological 'anomaly', a degeneration from the 'pure' model of race. By shifting the conceptual domain of blackness from a biological to a social reality, the poet has triggered a process of redefinition of Romani identity from within. In particular, such an inward turn may be considered the first step towards an actual *reversal* of the stereotypes and the formulation of a more positive image of the Roma, as will emerge in the part of this chapter devoted to the analysis of Roma's self-definitions.

In Šaban's poetry, suffering and discrimination are presented from an internal perspective, as the main key to interpret Romani life and *Weltanschauung*. The radicalization of this negative condition determines a loss of the most basic components of the identity of the Roma and, ultimately, of the very essence of their humanity. '*Io non sono un uomo*' (I am not a man), writes the Romanian poet D.T. Artezian; '*quando sono nato, ero un fanciullo, / e la mia mamma mi ha dato un nome. / Quando sono diventato un po' più grande, / ho maledetto il giorno in cui sono venuto al mondo*'.[19] The poet Ruzdija Seidović defines the Rom as 'weed': '*Me sem korov / Sono erbaccia*' (I am weed).[20] How should we interpret the radical pessimism so conspicuously manifested by these authors? To be fully understood, this attitude should not be reduced to a mere act of self-victimization, but it should be seen as part of a broader discourse aimed at provoking the readers (especially the Gağe), drawing their attention to the extreme violence that pervades every aspect of the life of the Roma. Violence is the thread running through their past history as well as a constant component of their everyday life; it is thus small wonder that it should be one of the salient *topoi* characterizing Romani literature. Within this common

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[19] 'The day I was born, I was a little child, / my mother gave me a name. / When I started growing up, / I cursed the day I was born' (my translation). Unpublished poem.

[20] See M. Karpati (ed.), *Zingari ieri e oggi* (Rome: Lacio Drom, 1993), p. 201.

theme, however, the authors have devised different ways to express the cruelty of the Gağe. Some interpret violence mainly in terms of physical, external violence, others define it essentially as a form of ethnic discrimination.

The following poem by Santino Spinelli illustrates effectively the disruptive effects of violence on family life. The author, a Rom from the Abruzzi whose diversified activities of intellectual and poet *engagé* are aimed at breaking Roma's century-old silence, entrusts his poetry with a strong condemnation for the harshness and the hatred displayed by the Gağe towards his people.

RÓDM[21]

Ni dàb ki vuddàr andrè i barì ràt
dànd barè di ğiukèl mardè,
ni putinì a katàr pru muj sovaddò
sunò dukkaddò sunò trašianò;
kalè jurvibbè kià ğiungalè
nafel bi mištipè dòš barì,
bar braval kià laččè...
a vuddàr pandindì ni sunò ningaddò
rovibbè pri pù... jilè čindè.

THE RAID

A knock on the door in the deepest night
the ferocious teeth of trained dogs
an automatic gun pointed at a sleepy face
shattered dream nightmarish hallucinations
black uniforms piercing stares
disgust and hate slanderous accusations
violent hurricane innocent eyes...
the door closed a dream disappeared
tears on the ground... torn hearts.

The poem is centred on the juxtaposition of abstract images: the knock on the door, the ferocious teeth, the automatic gun and the uniforms are images introduced abruptedly and emphasized by the use of metonymy and by the dramatic opening.

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[21] From S. Spinelli, *Romanipè / Ziganità* (Chieti: Solfanelli, 1993); translated by Minna Proctor.

Authority is faceless, reduced to the external signs of its power. The officers are deprived of human features, because there is nothing human in their violence.

In order to reproduce the hasty succession of events of the raid, the author makes large use of nominal style. Verbal forms appear only as past participles, and their meaning is very negative; it is possible, however, to identify a neat opposition between the passive attitude of the people and the brutal behaviour of the police ('sleepy faces' vs 'piercing stares'; 'innocent eyes' vs 'violent hurricane'). A brutal act marks the beginning of the poem and another one, embodied in an effective metaphor, is placed at its end. Violence is represented as a cyclic form and is compared to a natural phenomenon (the hurricane) in order to emphasize its unrestrained, destructive force. This excessive outburst of violence, underlied by the passivity of its harmless human targets, has devastating effects: the hearths of the victims are not merely 'broken', but 'torn', 'dismembered', deprived of life and emotions.

Violence is also experienced by the Roma through discrimination grounded in a racial basis:

ĆORI KALI MORĆI[22]

Ćori kali morći
phusaves e parnen ande jak
sar jek ćhuri
sar jek dopo
sar jek suv.

Jek cikno kalo
ćikamla maj but
korkoro te trajil.

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[22] POOR BLACK SKIN. It stings the eye / like a needle / like a spear / like a knife. / A little black man / did not want to be alone any longer, / burdened with books / he went and lived among white people / he wanted to study with them / he wanted to live with them / they did not like him. / They asked each other / a scornful look on their faces: / What is that black doing here? It stings the eye / like a needle / like a spear / like a knife. From S. Spinelli (ed.), *Baxtalo Drom / Felice Cammino I* (Pescara: Tracce, 1995), pp. 31-33; my translation.

Lija pese lila
talaj khank
gelo maśkar e parne manuśo
lençar te trajil
lençar te sićol.

Von phućle pes
e zoraja
so ćerel kadava kalo
kadathe.

Cori kali morći
phusaves e parnen and jak
sar jek suv
sar jek ćhuri
sar jek dopo.

POVERA PELLE NERA

Punge nel bianco dell'occhio
come un ago
come una lancia
come un coltello.

Un piccolo nero
non voleva essere più solo,
si caricò addosso un mucchio di libri
andò in mezzo a persone bianche
voleva studiare con loro
voleva vivere con loro
non piaceva loro.

Si chiedevano tra di loro
con sguardi cattivi:
Cosa? Quel nero qui?

Punge nel bianco dell'occhio
come un ago
come una lancia
come un coltello.

Jilija Jovanovic

An insurmountable black/white polarity lies at the heart of Jovanovic's poem. The 'little black man''s attempt to live among the Gağe is fatally nullified by the impenetrable barrier of external appearance. The painful experience of being the target of recurrent patterns of social exclusion generates the impression of a fixed.

insurmountable dichotomy underlying the Roma's relations with the Gağe. The world of the Gağe and that of the Roma appear to be separated by an unbridgeable gulf: no matter how hard a Rom may try to overcome this invisible barrier, his efforts are still doomed to failure.

This dramatic contrast is the dominant theme in the poetry of the Istrian Rom Mansueto Levacovich. His poem *Senza speranza* (without hope) represents the conflicting Roma/Gağe relationship as irremediable: the large majority of the Gağe (with a very few exceptions) seem to reject aprioristically any kind of contact with the Roma. In the eyes of many poets this condition of perpetual exclusion appears a sort of curse cast upon the Roma by the Gağe:

> 'Gagio, e tu gagi;
> voi che seguite il nostro cammino
> predicando amore e pace,
> ma non sapete cosa sono.
> Noi Rom siamo umiliati e perseguitati,
> bastonati, scacciati, stanchi e affamati.
> Vi supplichiamo: fermatevi.
> Le sofferenze sono tante e tante...
>
> No zingaro, zingari.
> Noi siamo il vostro destino.
> I nostri avi hanno perseguitato i vostri avi,
> noi perseguitiamo voi'.[23]

The curse that in medieval times was thought to be hanging over the 'Gypsies' is here reinterpreted from a different point of view. The curse mentioned in the poem is not seen as a divine punishment, due to the 'evil nature' of the 'Gypsies', but it is rather the result of the social marginalization of the Roma from the Gağe's society.

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[23] Extracted from the poem *Senza speranza* (Without hope): Gagio, and you gagi: / you who follow our way / preaching love and peace / without knowing what they mean. / We Rom are humiliated and persecuted, / beaten up, squashed, tired and hungry. / We beg you to stop. / Our sufferings are many, so many... / No Gypsy, no Gypsies. / We are your destiny. / Our ancestors persecuted your ancestors, / we persecute you. From the collection *Popolo mio dei Rom* (Padova: Francisci, 1991); my translation.

A sense of profound helplessness and disillusion seems to characterize these verses. The impression is that of a 'poetical *cri*', a powerful denunciation of injustice and the infringement of the political and human rights of Romani people.

Gagio, e tu gagi:
voi che predicate la compassione
come una delle più preziose
facoltà dell'anima umana,
e dite che nessuna società
è possibile,
e che nessun legame
può esistere tra gli uomini
senza di essa:
essa comprende
la giustizia e la carità.

Madre mia, noi siamo poveri,
e chiediamo una piccola particella.
Il gagio e la gagi
ci negano anche questo diritto
che ci appartiene.
Poveri figli miei,
il vostro avvenire mi spaventa.
Il gagio e la gagi
hanno il viso coperto;
i loro cuori sono pieni di odio.
Da questi non avremo
neanche un sollievo dalla nostra miseria.
Figli miei: il vostro avvenire
sarà di lacrime e di dolore.[24]

What lies at the root of this terrible curse whose consequences affect both the Roma and the Gağe? Why is it depicted in such pessimistic terms?

The Gagio and the Rom, suggests the author, seem to live in separate universes. The Gagio does not listen to the appeals of the Rom. He seems to be incapable of any sense of pity: '*il tuo disprezzo ed il tuo odio / ti rendono cieco e crudele*' (your

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[24] Extracted from the poem *Senza diritti né umanità* (Without rights or humanity): Gagio, and you, gagi: / you who celebrate compassion / as one of the most precious / qualities of the human soul, / you who say that no society / is conceivable, / and no bond / is possible among humans / without it: / it includes / justice and charity. / Oh mother, we are so poor, / and all we ask for is such a tiny crumb. / The gagio and the gagi / deny us even this right / which belongs to us. / My poor children, / I am frightened about your future. / The gagio and the gagi's faces / are veiled; / their hearts are full of

contempt and hatred have made you blind and cruel) and has no intention of ending the persecution against the Rom. A total lack of communication, this is what separates Roma and Gağe. Two diverging views of the world, two different conceptions of humanity are at the origin of this separation: the Gağe despise the Roma's way of life, which they consider an illegitimate resistance to conform to the rules of the majority society. On the other hand, the Roma accuse the Gağe of fomenting a persecutory attitude toward them, if not of supporting genocide. As a consequence, the Roma/Gağe relationship is reduced to power relations where the Gağe get the better of them. The Gagio is more powerful than the Rom, says Levacovich (*tu gagio, padrone assoluto di questa terra* – you gagio, absolute ruler of this world), but his predominance is perceived as a curse. By persecuting and murdering the Roma, the Gağe condemn themselves to damnation: hatred is a curse that traps oppressors and oppressed in the same vicious circle.

For many Romani authors, poetry represents the only way to break this vicious circle. By contributing to undermine and reverse the false images and stereotypes against their people, they hope to lay the basis for a constructive encounter with the non-Roma. The following section illustrates the poets' attempt to rectify two highly misunderstood aspects of their culture: the significance of nomadism for the Roma and their alleged lack of historical memory.

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hatred. / We will not receive any comfort / from these people. / Oh my children: your future / is filled with tears and suffering. From the collection *Popolo mio dei Rom*; my translation.

(i.ii) The Roma and the 'vexed question' of nomadism

The traditional image of the 'Gypsies' as picturesque 'tribes' leading a mysterious and romantic life of perpetual wandering has always played an important part in the imagery of the settled population. The issue of nomadism is not only at the root of a plethora of idealized, exotic representations. It is also one of the features of Romani society which has been most frequently misconceived. On the one hand, we have the romantic images by the Gağe poets, and the philosophical disquisitions praising the virtues of nomadism as a conscious refusal of the materialistic conventions of urban, settled life. On the other hand, there is the more prosaic approach adopted by governments and local authorities, which have constantly implemented policies aimed at restricting and discouraging the 'threat' posed by nomadism to the ordered and lawful life of the respectful citizens.

Both the legalistic and the literary views held by the Gağe on nomadism are profoundly misleading: despite their lack of accuracy, to the eyes of the non-Roma they perform and are exploited as truthful, realistic representations of 'Gypsy' identity. As we have seen, this conflation of fiction and reality inevitably leads to a reductive interpretation of Romani culture. By looking at the issue of nomadism merely in picturesque terms, as well as from the perspective of the 'Gypsy' savage, one completely overlooks the fact that nomadism is not a matter of free will or the expression of a capricious, untamed nature. Above all, it is not a sign of the 'radical alterity' of the Roma, conceived as if they were unable to conform to the rules of the majority.

Romani nomadism, far from being a form of ideological resistance to the majority's lifestile or an alleged 'criminal tendency', is a strategy connected with the socio-economic features of Romani society. As Liégeois rightly affirms,

> for Gypsies and Travellers, travelling fulfils a variety of functions: it makes social organization possible, allows adaptability and flexibility, enables the exercise of economic activities.[25]

Nomadism is thus much more than a 'state of mind' or a form of purposeless wandering: it is a social phenomenon that is subject to the continuous changes occurring in the socio-economic context. The economic activities privileged by the Roma, such as the sale of goods and services to the Gağe, entail specific dwelling patterns based on flexibility and spatial mobility. Highly specialized services traditionally provided by coppersmiths and blacksmiths, activities such as peddling, horse dealing, begging and fortune-telling all depend on specific 'peripatetic' strategies.[26] Besides being linked with the features of the particular 'economic niche' occupied by Romani groups and their relations to the wider economy of the settled population, nomadism is also related to the organizational fluidity of the Romani social system. Systematic studies on the social organization of the Roma have shown that it is the nuclear family that functions as the primary unit of production and consumption. As far as groupings larger than the nuclear family are concerned, they tend to be extremely flexible and constantly change in the course of time:[27]

> Group composition and size is continually being renegotiated in response to changing economic opportunities and a host of social concerns: the emergence of personal animosities and fissioning, visits form distant kin,

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[25] See J. P. Liégeois, *Roma, Gypsies and Travellers* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1994), p. 77.

[26] On the concept of 'peripatetic', see J. Berland and M. Salo (eds.), *Peripatetic Peoples*, in *Nomadic Peoples*, 21-22 (1986) and L. Piasere, *Popoli delle discariche*, pp.129-142.

[27] This extreme flexibility should not lead us to look at Romani society as an anarchic society on the verge of disintegration, as the considerable autonomy of every household is opportunely counter-balanced by a strong internal cohesion, based primarily on close kin relationships (mainly filiation and brotherhood).

> the need to defend relatives from insult or attack, the desire to affiliate with households of similar economic status, the wish for a change of scene.[28]

Despite its crucial relevance to Romani social and economic organization, nomadism is still a controversial issue for host societies, implicitly forbidden or expressly interdicted. Governments generally tend to enforce policies of compulsory sedentarization, whose hidden aim is that in due course nomadic people will end up settling down and adopting the lifestyle of the majority.[29] The situation is further complicated by the amount of interdictions and regulations that prevent Romani groups also from settling and camping within urban areas. Both the nomadic and the sedentary pattern of settlement are quite problematic, if not virtually impossible to practise. The result is that the Roma are obliged to move from one place to another, constantly rejected by the settled societies because undesirable.

What lies at the very roots of the Gağe's policies regarding nomadism is a striking contradiction: one the one hand, nomadism is discouraged and forbidden; on the other hand, as a result of expulsion, nomadism is often a compulsory state. This means that, even if the Roma were willing to settle among the non-Gypsies, they would not be allowed to do so. From this viewpoint, what is superficially considered 'freedom of movement' is in reality a forced exclusion from the dominant society. Consequently, the Roma are often trapped in this painful contradiction: marginalised against their will or forced to dwell at the fringes of our society. Whenever civil rights issues have been raised in relation to the discriminatory measures against 'Gypsies and Travellers', authorities have confined themselves to generic, ineffective

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[28] Sharon Bohn Gmelch, 'Groups That Don't Want In: Gypsies and Other Artisan, Trader, and Entertainer Minorities', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 15 (1986), 307-330 (p. 315).

[29] This policy of assimilation has been particularly common in Eastern Europe (especially in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and Romania), whereas Western European countries seemed to adopt the opposite trend, that of enforcing nomadism. However, it is very difficult to generalize, and there is

exhortations to a 'compassionate', sympathetic approach towards them, but in fact they have endorsed legislations and provisions whose result has been to criminalize their way of life.

The centuries-old reiteration of compulsory expulsion and/or assimilation of Romani people has had serious consequences on their living conditions. Major historical and socio-economic changes occurred within the settled society in the course of the centuries have deeply affected and modified the features of Romani nomadism. Most European Romani groups - especially during the post-World War II period - have generally displayed a marked tendency towards sedentarization and yet, to the eyes of the Gağe, their image is widely associated with the timeless, romantic figure of the 'nomadic 'Gypsy'', Western society's most rebellious outlaw. The precarious living conditions of the actual Roma, however, have nothing to do with freedom and carelesness but are those typical of a rootless, persecuted people. Their literary texts provide us with a valuable insight into this unknown side of their nomadism, which cannot be dismissed as a romantic theme or an original lifestyle, being directly related to the issue of social marginalization. From this point of view, the issue of nomadism is chiefly concerned with the inadequacy of governmental policies to meet the needs of the Roma, and with the general hostility of the settled population, nourished and fostered by misleading images lacking any realistic knowledge of Romani society and way of living.

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increasing pressure toward compulsory settlement also within Western legislation, such as the Caravan Sites Act in England, in 1968.

Romani poets highlight the problematic side of their nomadic life by referring to 'a life of wandering / forwards, backwards' along roads forgotten by time.[30] They write about a 'long road' that leads nowhere, of a 'journey of sorrow':

THE LONG ROAD[31]

We took a road into night
unaware of where it might lead.
We left behind a great land
and started our journey of sorrow.

We strayed over many a byway
carrying our heavy loads.
We buried our dead along the way;
in the forest our fathers grew old.

In the midst of the darkest place
we sat ourselves down to rest.
We paused to revive our spirits
and as we sat there, we slept.

No bread we ate nor water drank;
not a crust passed our lips.
When morning came we got up again
and continued along the road.

Iliaz Šaban

Some see themselves 'tramping along the road', 'barefoot, ravenous', with no place to shelter, deserted by everyone and condemned to die along the road. The Roma are depicted as a people 'without house or grave', as stated in a poem by Rajko Djurić:

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[30] '(...) Kon pašavol/Kon duravol/Maškar e xasarde droma 'ivdimasqe', from the poem *Without House or Grave* by Rajko Djurić, published in the collection *The Roads of the Roma*, pp. 143-145.
[31] From *The Roads of the Roma*, p. 34; published only in the English version.

BI KHERESQO BI LIMORESQO[32]

O-o-o
lele mange sajek

o-o-o
joj dade morejana
Tu bi limoresko
Amen bi kheresko
Te avas e balvalake p-o phurdipe
e themeske po khandipe

Kaj maj
Džikaj maj

o-o-o
joj daje guglijena
Pe savo barh te ačhav
Katar tut te akharav
Phanglo si amenge o del
E phuv sargo kaj čuči si
bi khanikasko

Kaj maj
Džikaj maj

Kon pašavol
Kon duravol
Maškar e xasarde droma trajimaske.

WITHOUT HOUSE OR GRAVE

O-o-o
goes my endless lament

o-o-o
to my father-o
my graveless father
my homeless people
toys of the wind
dregs of the world

Where then
Where then from here?

o-o-o
to my mother-o
gentle mother
where is there a stone
on which to raise me up

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[32] From *The Roads of the Roma*, pp.143-145; published in *romanes* and translated into English by Siobhan Dowd.

that I might call your name?
The sky is our cover
and wherever I fly
the ground is barren
without a heart.

Where then
Where then from here?

… a life of wandering
forwards, backwards
along the roads
that time forgot.

Rajko Djurić

These images are in striking contrast with the artificial gaiety animating the 'Gypsy' settlements described by Gağe poets.[33] The very concept of travelling is devoid here of its primary meaning, and reduced to an endless, circular wandering, a kind of 'vicious circle' triggered by the hostile attitude of the Gağe. The destiny of Romani people, says the poet, is to pursue an hopeless, frustrating search for tolerance and human understanding:

PHIR[34]

Ćororro rrom, kaj zàsa taha.
Gaźo tasàvi, naj mèsto vas-o źivìni.
Ćororro rrom, tri lav and-o bùra,
kon tut śùnla?
vogi… sar barr,
na źanen attaripe skor jag.
Hikh angle ma pe dar,
jekh Devel 'men hile
mothòvla 'menque o drom,
dikèrla 'men vaśo
i phènla: "phir… phir"

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[33] See for instance the famous verses by Pushkin: 'In clamorous throng the gypsies wander. / Tonight they spread their tattered tents /Encamped beside the river yonder. / Gay is their camp, like freedom gay, / Their sleep beneath the stars untroubled' (A. Puskin, *The Gypsies*, translated by trans. by D. M. Thomas).

[34] WALK ON. Poor Rom, where is your future. / The gagio is strangling you, you have no place to live. / Poor Rom, you are wasting your breath, / who is ever going to listen to you? / Hearts of stone, / they do not know how to warm themselves around the fire. / Look ahead without fear, / we have a God / He will show us the way, / He will hold our hand / and He will say to us: 'Walk on… walk on'. From S. Spinelli, (ed.), *Šunge luluda / Fiori profumati* (Pescara: Italica, 1994); English translation mine.

CAMMINA

Povero Rom, dove [sic] il tuo domani.
Il gagio ti soffoca, non c'è posto per vivere.
Povero Rom, la tua parola al vento,
chi ti ascolterà?
Cuore... come sasso,
non sanno scaldarsi attorno al fuoco.
Guarda avanti non temere,
un Dio abbiamo
ci farà vedere la strada,
ci terrà per mano
e dirà: "Cammina... cammina".

Nada Braidic

AV TE ĞAS[35]

Av te ğas
gndiv kodothe
kaj si e ile maj pherde kamlimaja
kaj o manro amença kam fulavel-pe.

Av te ğas
gniv kav jek ili kaj
ni jekh than
kaj o komlipe
maśkar manuśa trajil
kaj joś śaj zagrlis
thaj cunudos jekh avre.

As te ğas
ama khonik
či ğanel kaj.
Gndiv kaj jekh garadino than
kaj lesko vas inğarel amen
te rodas jek avre ande
amende.

LA RICERCA DELLA PACE

Vieni, andiamo,
forse lì
dove i cuori sono più pieni d'amore
e dove il pane viene diviso con noi.

Vieni, andiamo
forse in un posto o nessun posto

---

[35] THE SEARCH FOR PEACE. Let us go to a place / where the hearts are filled with love / where the bread may be shared with us. / Let us go to a place or maybe nowhere / a place where mutual love still lives on / where we may find embraces and kisses. / Let us go / nobody knows where / Maybe to a secret place / where people search and find themselves in the others. From S. Spinelli (ed.) *Baxtalo Drom I* (Pescara:Tracce, 1995), p. 34; my translation.

dove vive ancora l'amore verso il prossimo
dove esistono abbracci e baci.

Vieni, andiamo
ma nessuno sa dove
forse in un posto segreto
dove le persone si cercano
e si trovano negli altri.

Jlija Jovanovic

In these poems, the Gypsies' itinerancy is depicted as a kind of compulsory estrangement from settled society. At the same time, the nomadic way of life is connected with a nostalgic recollection of their past freedom, when the Gypsies were allowed to travel without encountering too many difficulties. In those days, say the poets, there was real freedom for Gypsies. That was a time of happiness, as the Roma enjoyed a 'harmonic' condition. One of the most representative examples of the idealization of the Roma's nomadic past is to be found in the poetry of Papusza (Bronislava Wais). Papusza lived in a time of profound changes for her people. In the 1950s the Polish Gypsies became the target of a policy of forced sedentarization, in which she was directly involved. Much of her poetry refers to her former nomadic way of life and is characterised by a nostalgic recollection of a happy childhood in communion with Nature:

O forest, my father,
My black father!
You raised me
Now you abandon me
Your leaves tremble
And I tremble like them
You sing and I sing,
You smile and I smile.
You have not forgotten
And I remember you

Oh Lord of the trees,
where should I go?
What can I do?
Where can I find

Legends and songs?
I do not go to the forest,
I meet with no rivers.
Oh forest, my father,
My black father!

Our time, the time
of the wandering Gypsies
Has long passed
But I see them,
They are bright,
Strong and clear like water.
You can hear it
Wandering
When it wishes to speak.
But poor thing, it has no speech
Apart from silver splashing and sighing.
Only the horse, grazing the grass,
Listens and understands that sighing.
But the water does not look behind
It flees, runs away further,
Where eyes will not see her,
The water that wanders[36]

These verses describe a loss, a longing for an irretrievable condition, but they also celebrate a way of life in accordance with the laws of natural life by referring to a past with mythical connotations. As the next section will show, instead of merely indulging in a lament for a waning epoch, the Romani poets address their history in order to draw inspiration for the present time and its challenges to their culture and identity. By means of a process of 'cultural reinvention', the past is reconstructed and reshaped in order to provide the Roma with a sense of unity, strengthened by the sharing of a common history.

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[36] English translation appeared in *Polish Literature in English Translation. 31 Jan. 2004.* 22 March 2004. http://home.nycap.rr.com/polishlit/20.html.

(i.iii) The Holocaust and Romani memory

The evocation of the past plays a large part in Romani poetry. *Memory* is mostly treasured by the authors, who never fail to point out the necessity to preserve it and encourage its diffusion among Roma and Gağe. We may identify at least two main acceptions of memory as encountered in the texts analysed in this section. A large number of poems invoke the memory of a distant, mythical past, in an effort to retrace the Roma's journey from India to Europe. Such memories function as the symbolic repository of the unity of Romani people and are currently at the core of their ethnic claims. Secondly, we may find recent memories whose painful consequences are still far from being eased. However different in their genesis and structure, the aims of these two forms of remembrance are substantially converging, as they both strengthen the perception of a common Romani identity. The memory of the Holocaust, in particular, is frequently employed as a powerful reminder of the persecutions undergone by the Roma. By recalling the tragic events of the *porrajmos*,[37] the Roma unveil the existence of a striking paradox lying at the very heart of European history. For centuries the identity of the Roma has been overshadowed and colonized by the multifarious manifestations of the 'fictional Gypsy'. The long process of aesthetic reduction and purposeful manipulation of the 'Gypsy' image has reached the stage where the very existence of the 'Gypsies' has been called into question. The search for the 'pure 'Gypsies'', the nomadic tribes of Puskinian reminiscence, was to be unsuccessful but this did not prevent the extermination of hundreds of thousands of Gypsies in the concentration camps.

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[37] See I. Hancock, *We are the Romany People: Ame Sam e Rromane Dzene* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2002), pp. 34-52.

Romani poets denounce such criminal mystifications by firmly stating the actuality of their condition against the tendentious fictionalization of their identity.

It has often been assumed that the Roma generally avoid talking about the Holocaust because they are alleged to know nothing about it. In fact, this is far from being the case. There are certainly many Roma that refuse altogether to touch on this subject, but this should not lead us to think that they simply *ignore* the Holocaust. 'Let me assure you', wrote Nadia Hava-Robbins, 'that there is scarcely a Rom, as there is scarcely a Jew, that is not aware of the Holocaust'. As for memory, *silence* has an important function in the construction of a group's past: remembrance and oblivion dynamically overlap and re-define the boundaries of social memory. As regards the Roma, the mechanism of oblivion has played an important role in their relationship with the Gağe. Oral narratives did not fail to record and interpret past events, but they were mostly confined within the protective boundaries of the group. As far as the sharing of these memories with an external audience is concerned, however, that is quite a different matter.

As anthropologists point out, one of the main features of Romani identity and culture is undoubtedly their extreme flexibility. By constantly adapting to the current social and cultural context, the Roma have managed to avoid the perils of cultural assimilation. The incessant process of re-shaping and reconstruction of Romani identity – a dynamic which is by definition at the basis of any form of identity[38] – has at its core a complex strategy of avoidance and partial contact with the institutions of the dominant society. This ethnic strategy entails for example a limited involvement in the Gağe's scholastic system and the adoption of a pattern of restricted literacy, as

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[38] For a broader discussion on identity and its constitutive process, see Chapter 5.

we have seen in Chapter 3. The mechanism of forgetting could be seen as part of this strategy, which clarifies the reason why for some Roma it has been advisable to hide their ethnic roots. Under particular circumstances, as Ian Hancock points out, 'Gypsies may [...] even prefer the idea that non-Gypsies believe the literary image'.[39] This attitude is connected with the perception of a major breach dividing the world of the Roma from that of the Gağe: to many Roma, the Gağe are so distant and indifferent that their views are not considered relevant. Most Romani poets, however, seem to adopt quite a different approach. Like other witnesses of the Holocaust, they feel a moral obligation to constantly remind the Gağe of the events of the genocide:

My eyes wanted to cry
My voice wanted to scream
My fists wanted to fight
My heart wanted to flight
My soul wanted to hide
but My conscience would not let me
it makes Me speak
it makes Me write.[40]

The writings of these poets, are thus conceived as an eloquent response to those who still try to deny the historical truth of the genocide, and are conceived as a perpetual testimony for future generations.

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[39] See I. Hancock, *Introduction*, in D. Crowe and J. Kolsti (eds.), *The Gypsies of Eastern Europe* (New York: Sharpe, 1991), p. 6.

[40] See Nadia Hava-Robbins. "Spirit and Sound of the Gypsies." 17 Feb. 1997. Online. Available: http://www.Romani.org/local/rwgbhltr.txt. 29 Mar. 2004. Letter to 'Sound and Spirit'.

GAZISARDE ROMENGI VIOLINA[41]

Gazisarde romengi violina
ačile ognjište romane
e jag o dimo
ando oblako vazdinjalo.
Idžarde e Romen
čavoren restavisarde pe datar
e romnjen pe romendar
idžarde e Romen.

Jasenovco perdo Roma
pangle pala betonse stubujra
pale lantsujra pe prne pe va
ando balto dzi ke cang.

Ačile ando Jasenovco
lenge kokala
te pricin, o nemanušengim djelima
zora vedro osvanisarda
i Romen o kam pre tatarda.

HANNO CALPESTATO IL VIOLINO ZIGANO

Hanno calpestato il violino zigano
cenere zingara è rimasta
fuoco e fumo
salgono al cielo.

Hanno portato via gli Zingari
i bambini divisi dalle madri
le donne dagli uomini
hanno portato via gli Zingari.

Jasenovac è pieno di Zingari
legati ai pilastri di cemento
pesanti catene ai piedi e alle mani
nel fango in ginocchio.

Sono rimaste a Jasenovac
le loro ossa
denuncia di disumanità
altre albe schiariscono il cielo
e il sole continua a scaldare gli Zingari.

Rasim Sejdić

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[41] THEIR FEET CRUSHED THE GYPSY VIOLIN. Their feet crushed the Gypsy violin / only Gypsy ash remains / fire and smoke / rise up towards the sky. / They took the Gypsies away / the children separated from their mothers / the women from their men / they took the Gypsies away / Jasenovac is full of Gypsies / tied to cement pillars / hand and foot bound by heavy chains / kneeling in the mud. / Only their bones / remain in Jasenovac / a denunciation of inhumanity / there will be other dawns to light up the sky / and the sun is still warming the Gypsies. From R. Sejdić, *Rasim poeta zingaro* (Rho: Publi and Press, 1987); my translation.

In this poem Romani art (represented by the violin) epitomizes the 'spirit', the very essence of Romani culture and becomes a symbol of Romani people. The opening verses are dominated by images of destruction and annihilation: the violin is trampled on, the Gypsy people are reduced to ashes, the unity of the family and the mother/child dyad are unmercifully shattered. The poet seems to emphasize the inhuman violence that swept away his people by contrasting images of levity (the violin) and love (both filial and marital) with images of extreme gravity (cement pillars, heavy chains, kneeling in the mud).

In contrast to the gruesome, lifeless images of the initial lines, the closing lines of the poem present us with images of life (*albe*, *sole*) and light, as to emphasize that even the most devastating act of ethnic annihilation against the Romani people, however, has not achieved the expected result (*altre albe schiariscono il cielo / e il sole continua a scaldare gli Zingari*). The material signs of the genocide (*le loro ossa*) cannot be erased, and they remain as perpetual testimony to man's inhumanity.

But what happens when that act of inhumanity is purposely denied and neglected? Besides the images of the broken violin, a recurrent definition of the Romani Holocaust is that of the 'forgotten Holocaust', which seems to echo the centuries-old denial of Romani identity.

BISTARDI LAIDA[42]

Stil, phari, tunkel rathy
u himlo hì kalo. pharo fon stilapen!
Givela an u lufto muldrengri gili!
fon kala brar, grau bar.

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[42] FORGOTTEN HOLOCAUST. Silence, desolation, dark night / the sky is gloomy, heavy with silence! / the mournful dirge fills the air! / From these stones, grey stones, / from every debris, from the shattered frames, / a desperation made of blood and tears rises. / My spirit gets caught up in the wire fences / And my soul clings to the bars, / prisoner in the enemy's house! / Who am I? Nobody! Who are you? Nobody! / Sinti, who are you? Nobody! Only shadows, / fog! Fog that idle customs hold back / as prisoner of the greatest infamy / in the history of mankind!. See M. Karpati (ed.), *Zingari ieri e oggi*, p. 208; my translation.

von haki zugrunda fon pargerdé raume,
kant fon rat und treni.
Mu gaisto hangela an u stekeltrota.
Mar zela hengrelpes pù sasstar,
plandli an fremdo them!
Kun hone? Keck! Tu kun hal? Keck!
Tume sinti kun han? Keck! Nur shata,
nebla! Nebla furr braucha čass
Phlandli fon brardar čilačipen
fon menčengri historia!

OLOCAUSTO DIMENTICATO

Silenzio, desolazione, oscura notte
il cielo è cupo, pesante di silenzio!
aleggia nell'aria la nenia della morte!
Da queste pietre, grigie pietre,
da ogni rovina, dalle cornici infrante,
esala disperazione di sangue e lacrime.
Il mio spirito s'impiglia nel filo spinato
E la mia anima s'aggrappa alle sbarre,
prigioniera in casa nemica!
Chi sono? Nessuno! Tu chi sei? Nessuno!
Voi Sinti chi siete? Nessuno! solo ombre,
nebbia! Nebbia che per abitudine è rimasta
prigioniera della più grande infamia
della storia dell'uomo!

Paula Schöpf

The meaning of *silence* can be essentially twofold: on the one hand, silence means absence of life. This is the silence of the victims, reduced to mere shadows. A violent death deprived the Sinti of their voice, preventing them from giving testimony to the greatest act of infamy in the history of mankind. On the other hand, there is the silence of the living, the shameful attempt to conceal the truth. It is the poet's duty to denounce any attempt to falsify history and to demand justice on behalf of her people.

The poem exemplifies the performative function which informs such a large part of Romani literary production. The whole structure of the poem is shaped in accordance with this function: rethorical questions and replies follow one another

incessantly, emphasized by the frequent use of peremptory statements and exclamations.

This powerful 'dramatization' of the poetic discourse is also to be found in a surrealistic use of language and images, exemplified by the following poem by Santino Spinelli:

AUSCHWITZ[43]

Muj šukkó,
kjá kalé
vušt šurdé;
kwit.
Jiló čindó
bi dox,
bi lav,
nikt rubvé.

AUSCHWITZ

Faccia incavata,
occhi oscurati,
labbra fredde;
silenzio.
Cuore strappato
senza fiato,
senza parole,
nessun pianto.

It has been pointed out that the events of the Holocaust represented a total subversion of any rational structure in human behaviour and conceptualization. In this poem the sequential order of events is replaced by a mere justaxposition of images. The opening lines provide the reader with a surrealist deformation of the human face, reduced to an aggregate of constituents devoid of any inner life. The absence of life is conveyed by a process of cumulative detraction: flesh is removed from the face, light is taken away from the eyes, warmth and sound

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[43] AUSCHWITZ. Sunken face, / veiled eyes, / cold lips; / silence. / Torn heart / breathless / speechless / no crying. From S. Spinelli, *Gilí Romaní / Canto Zingaro* (Rome: Lacio Drom, 1988); my translation.

vanish from the lips. The symbolic climax of this process of detraction resides in the central image of the torn heart, effectively highlighted by the anaphoric repetition of the adverb *bi* (without) and by the adjective *nikt* (no).

KUSIBBÈ ROMANÒ[44]

Surdè vašt kalè šdinè ku thèm,
panì milalò a čiarèl u širò
sa tritimmè,
ni lùk a šunèp pandindò,
nikt a šunèl.
Ginè bi nafèl
ku mirribbè 'ngirdè,
nikt a dikkià
nikt a vakirià.
Mulé riğğidè
andrè u panì milalò,
xalè muj angiàl ku khàm,
u 'ngustò a sìnnl
angiàl ki kòn
u kwit a čilò!

MALEDIZIONE ZINGARA

Gelide mani nere rivolte al cielo,
la palude ricopre la testa
schiacciata,
un grido soffocato si eleva,
nessuno ascolta.
Un popolo inerme
al massacro condotto,
nessuno ha visto
nessuno ha parlato.
Cadaveri risorti
dalla palude,
orribili visi mostrati al sole,
il dito puntato
verso chi ha taciuto!

The infernal images that pervade this poem seem to portray a circle of Dante's Hell: the motionless condition of the victims trapped in the mud, the unheard cries and the

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[44] GYPSY CURSE. Black ice-cold hands turning towards the sky, / the mud covers the crushed head, / a muffled cry rises, / nobody listens to it. / A helpless people / led to the massacre, / nobody has seen / nobody has said anything. / Corpses resurrected / from the swamp, / horrible faces shown to the sun / a finger pointed / at those who kept silent. S. Spinelli, *Romanipè / Ziganità*; my translation.

faces twisted with pain resemble the situation of the damned. All these images contribute to paint a sort of 'archetypal' landscape, which presents remarkable similarities with other poetic representations of the Holocaust. This landscape is generally depicted as a place with no light and no human pity. Deserted by everybody, the victims are completely overcome by violence and death. Every element of this world - howls of despair, imprisoned bodies, disfigured corpses - evokes an unutterable sense of anguish and despair.

It is worth noting that the title of the poem alludes to a curse (*kusibbè*). As we have seen, according to stereotypical representation, the 'Gypsies' were condemned to wander in exile since they were the object of a terrible curse. Here, the curse is significantly reversed against the Gağe, guilty of the massacre of an unarmed people carried out amidst total indifference.

(ii) Where is the Romani truth? The search for Romani identity

ROMANI ISTINA KAJ SI? [45]

Romani istina kaj si?
Otkad džanav andar ma
tsahrentsa po tem pirav
rodav ljubav te zagrljaj
čačipe taj sreča.

Purilem e dromentsa
ljubav ni maraklen čačo
čačo alav ni ašundem.
Romani istina kaj si?

Rasim Sejdić

The widespread representations of the primitive 'Gypsy' frozen within a timeless, natural state in which individual identity and self-expression cannot but succumb to collective needs,[46] are substantially undermined by an in-depth analysis of Romani literary production. In fact, a close look at the texts reveals that the Roma make use of writing in order to express their identity, and they do so in a highly diversified way. Firstly, we observe the presence of traditional and romantic self-depictions of the Roma, which are partly influenced by the Gağe's literary representations and are devoted to the celebration of Romani freedom and way of life. We find definitions of Romani identity based on ethnic grounds, whose main aim is to establish a sense of community among the Romani groups scattered world-wide. We may also detect the attempt to give voice to individual issues, which provides us with unprecedented insights into Romani culture and society.

To a certain extent, writing has encouraged the use of written texts to convey issues of identity. As scholars point out, writing is a solipsistic process which

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[45] WHERE IS GYPSY TRUTH? Where is Gypsy truth? / As far back as I can remember / I have gone about the world with my tent / I am looking for love and affection / For truth and good fortune. / I have grown old on the road / I have not found true love / I have not heard a true word / Where is Gypsy truth? English translation appeared in J. P. Liégeois, *Roma, Gypsies, Travellers*, p.77. Originally published in the collection *Rasim poeta zingaro* (Rho: Publi and Press, 1987).

[46] See Chapter 1.iv and Chapter 2.ii-2.iv.

promotes the 'inward turn' and therefore intensifies the sense of the self. Writing technology is the medium through which internal meaning is decontextualized and removed from the continuous flux of human consciousness to be finally subjected to critical analysis. This is not to say that internal meaning is to be seen as an unstructured flow: our inner life presents *ab origine* a sort of organized framework which disciplines our mental activity and behaviour. As Ong points out,

> ontologically and phylogenetically, it is the oral word that first illuminates consciousness with articulate language, that first divides subject and predicate and then relates them to one another, and that ties human beings to one another in society. Writing introduces division and alienation, but a higher unity as well. It intensifies the sense of the self and fosters more conscious interaction between persons. Writing is consciousness-raising.[47]

On the one hand, writing decontextualizes the linguistic meaning and submits it to the scrutiny of the individual consciousness. On the other hand, writing provides individuals with an effective strategy to establish a wider network connecting them to other individuals. These two functions of writing are clearly detectable within Romani written production and certainly contribute to determine its dominant features, which will be examined in detail in this section.

To acknowledge the role of writing in shaping the features of Romani literature does not mean to consider writing as the only 'source' of Romani self-representations. However, the central function performed by written technology in supporting the main aims of this literary production is undeniable. As already seen, one of the main characteristics of Romani literature is its function as 'social critique', its role in fighting exclusion and discrimination. To this purpose, the manipulation of the written medium provides the poets with the opportunity to target the Gağe

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[47] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p 179.

directly, by entering their communication system and making use of the 'words of the oppressor' – to echo Sartre's expression.[48] Another crucial function of Romani written poetry is its 'constructive' function – what we have called the *pars construens* of the writing process. The next section aims to show that the role of the poet is not limited to denouncing the age-old exploitation of the 'Gypsy' image, but is also concerned with the 'awakening' of his/her people's sense of identity. It is precisely at this level, when the 'poetic cry' is turned into an act of *parole*, that the role of the poet meets with the claims of many Romani intellectuals. In this context, to be a poet and a member of a discriminated minority means to be committed to instil a sense of group membership, to increase the awareness of the ethnic roots of the Roma.

The Roma are continuously faced with the terrible reality of persecution and marginalization. They are mostly regarded as outsiders, as negative figures arousing feelings of fear and mistrust. But how do they see themselves? How do they write about their own identity?

There is no simple answer to such questions. In fact, given the complexity of issues concerning the expression, manipulation and interpretation of cultural identity, it would be more appropriate to talk about Romani identity as an irreducible plurality whose various manifestations need to be studied in their specific context of situation. For the sake of this analysis, we have chosen to dwell especially on the aspects which are presented as the most representative of the Romani *Weltanschauung* (the so-called *Romanipè*) and are constantly opposed to the stereotypical representations by the Gağe, but there are also other aspects of this identity – such as the 'female

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[48] See Sartre's 'Orphée noir' in L. S. Senghor, *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* (Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1969), p. xviii.

voice' – which testify to its dynamic and multifarious nature. The first part of this section highlights the main components, the 'core'[49] of what the authors present as the Romani way of life, that is, love of freedom, a unique relationship with nature and adherence to a number of communal values (*Romanipè*) recognized as fundamental to the self-definitions of the Roma. The focus will then gradually shift from collective issues to the poetry of some female authors who combine the proud affirmation of their group membership with a marked tendency to give voice to issues concerned with their personal situation.

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[49] The term 'core', as well as the use of abstract nouns such as *Romanipè* and the biological metaphor of the 'Gypsy' blood reflect the self-definitions of the Roma.

(ii.i) Living the 'Romani way'

What is at the core of the Romani way of life? Freedom, write the poets, is what the Roma value most. In fact, many of their works could be defined essentially as a 'hymn' to liberty, which is primarily freedom of movement: '*amo il bosco / amo la strada / amo la libertà*' (I love the forest / I love the road / I love freedom)[50], proclaims the poet. The road, *o drom*, symbolizes the destiny of the Roma and is their greatest asset:

DESTINO[51]

Som puró te kinó
ma nastí čáva.
Le Sínti čéna, mónsi
te merén,
sóske o drom si léngro trúpo.
Pro drom jamén vássa pru vélto,
pasál da le dromá jamén ğivássa,
pro búto da je drom léla amén
o meribén.

DESTINO

Sono vecchio e affaticato
ma non posso restare.
Gli Zingari si fermano solo
per morire,
perché la strada è la loro vita.

Sulla strada veniamo al mondo,
lungo le strade viviamo,
in fondo ad una strada ci prende
la morte.

Pučo

The road is regarded as a metaphor of the Romani life and is frequently associated

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[50] From the poem *Sune fan terne gipen sintengre* (Dream of Gypsy childhood) by Mauso Olimpio Cari, published in Karpati (ed.), *Zingari ieri e oggi*, p. 207; my translation.

[51] This poem appeared in *Lacio Drom*, 1 (1991). DESTINY. I am old and tired / but I cannot stay. / The Gypsies stop only / to die, / because the road is their life. / On the road we are born, / On the road we live, / At the end of a road death / Will catch us; my translation.

with other images of a nomadic way of living, such as the tent (or the cart).

'Pala niso po them
pala ni jek čher
pala sa e čherá po them
ni zamjeniha mi tsahra.
Inzarav la pala kratko vreme
biri me naj šukár than
kaj hi naj šukar čar
the o kham teharinaha
krizo patrá čhudol pe naj šukar zrake
pe mi tsahra.
Svako čirikli angla grmo
ğilabel samo pala mande.
Tala mi tsahra me sem baxtaló.'[52]

Liberty is here presented as a central aspect of Romani identity but is also perceived as an existential condition, a way of living and looking at the world which is firmly opposed by the Gağe: 'the Sinti stop only / to die / because the road is their life'.[53] In this context, to 'stay' means essentially to assimilate into the Gağe's society by giving up the Romani way of life. These poems represent freedom as a positive condition, as an act of affirmation of the Romani diversity from the settled society and also as a factor of continuity with the past and the values of the tradition. Unfortunately, nowadays the Roma are often deprived of their freedom, as a consequence of the growing diffusion of policies aimed at suppressing Romani nomadism[54] and, more in general, of their problematic relation with the majority society. For this reason freedom cannot be considered a definitive achievement for the Roma, but is constantly restricted and suppressed as a result of imprisonement, human rights violations and social marginalization.

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[52] For nothing in the world / not even for a house / and for all the houses in the world / I would change my tent. / I make camp in a short time / choosing the best place / where the grass is better, / where the sunlight enters through the leaves / and brings warmth. / Every bird perching on the tree / sings only for me. / In my tent I am the happiest man in the world. From the poem *Mi tsahra* (My tent) by Š. Advić, *Poesie* (Cuneo: Primalpe, 1985); translated from *romanes* by Sergio Franzese, English translation mine.

[53] See the poem *Destino* by Pučo.

[54] See Section 4.i.ii.

The so-called 'songs of imprisonment' highlight a fundamental aspect of the Romani conception of art and its genesis. To the Rom, poetry – like music – is primarily the expression of an internal condition variously defined as 'sadness' and 'melancholy', but also the essential means of self-expression in situations of isolation, exclusion and lack of communication. From his solitary confinement, the poet entrusts his verses with the lament for lost freedom: '*Hom jek Sinto / zivava stildo / dre i laida / mange kok'ro*' (I am a Sinto / I live in jail / alone / with my sorrow)[55]. Deprived of his liberty, he is forced to lead a 'dim', lonely life: *Dunkel ziben / kana kok'ro hal / mit i tuga / dren i tsela* (Life is lightless / when you are alone / with your sorrow / in poverty)[56]. In this condition his only wish is to be delivered from this misery by death:

'Rovela mur ži
u frai žiben,
rovena mar jaka.
Mit u treni
diom pre p'u fligi
fon jek svalba:
Den man mur frai žiben.
Muken te merap
tel jek tikni tana,
har jek Sinto.

Piange il mio cuore
la vita libera,
piangono i miei occhi.
Con le lacrime
scrivo sulle ali
di una rondine:
Rendimi la mia libera vita.
Che io possa morire
sotto un piccolo pino
come un Sinto.'[57]

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[55] From the poem *Hom jek Sinto* (I am a Sinto) by Vittorio Mayer Pasquale (Spatzo), published in Karpati (ed.), *Zingari ieri e oggi* (Rome: Lacio Drom, 1993), p. 206; my translation.

[56] See the poem *Hom jek Sinto*; my translation.

[57] My heart mourns / the free life, / my eyes are shedding tears. / With these tears / I write on the wings / of a swallow: / Give me my freedom back. / May I die / under a small pine / like a Sinto. From the poem *Hom jek Sinto*; my translation.

What the prisoner misses most about his free life is contact with the natural world, from which he is forcibly removed: '*Libero come un gabbiano / voglio essere. / Libertà di comunicare con la natura. / Ma non posso / perché / la mia possibilità / resta solo la prigionia*' (I want to be / free as a seagull. / Freedom to communicate with Nature. / But I cannot / because / my only possibility / is to be in jail).[58] It is as if the life of a Rom cannot find its authentic fulfilment away from the realm of Nature: '*Al chiuso non so stare, / senza il profumo dell'erba non posso dormire / e senza il canto degli uccelli non mi so svegliare*' (I cannot live under a roof/I cannot get to sleep without the scent of the grass/I cannot wake up without the singing of the birds),[59] writes the poet from his cell.

The freedom of the Roma, though treasured above anything else, is also at the root of a sense of precariousness, rootlessness and alienation. *Som puró te kinó ma nastí ćáva*, says the poet, 'I am old and tired, but I cannot stop'.[60] The incapacity to put down roots, to make a place one's home is not devoid of a considerable amount of hardship and suffering. A sense of fragility, of helplessness in front of the inexorable flux of time runs through most of Romani poetry. The condition of perpetual change and displacement – wanted or induced, real or metaphorical – which characterizes the Roma generates an acute perception of the precariousness of human life. It is maybe to overcome the profound sense of precariousness that lies at the core of Romani life that the poets devote a large part of their writing to a proud and enthusiastic celebration of Romani life. This leads to the positive reassessment of

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[58] Luigi Cirelli, *Nostalgia di libertà*, in *Senza meta* (Milan: Opera Nomadi, 1994), p. 38; published only in the Italian version.

[59] From the poem *Řomeki Sloboda* by Š. Advić, *Poesie* (translated from *romanes* by Sergio Franzese; English translation mine).

[60] See the poem *Destino* by Pučo.

traits traditionally regarded by the Gağe as denoting inferiority and marginality and, ultimately, to their poetic idealization.

IO SONO ZINGARA[61]

Io sono zingara,
Una zingara io la regina del creato
Al mattino con un cenno della mano faccio sorgere il sole
La pioggia accarezza il mio corpo con la freschezza dei suoi occhi
La rugiada disseta le mie labbra riempiendomi di profumo intenso d'infinito.
Ogni minuscolo essere allieta con la sua musica il mio pensiero
ed invade di miele il sangue, il vento corteggia
la mia chioma ove si nasconde amante misterioso ed appassionato.
Io sono zingara principessa dei mari e dei fiumi, ho nella pelle
il profumo del muschio e del grano maturo.
Io sono zingara imperatrice dei boschi e valli del cielo e dell'amore, l'amore che nasce dal fango e dal muschio
e si addormenta nel profumo del fieno.
Io zingara sono la libertà tengo la luna in una mano e il sole nell'altra
non ho casa né bandiera ma il mondo è ai miei piedi.
Io zingara nelle notti di luna appoggio il capo sulla montagna
mentre una chitarra innamorata accarezza vibrando
il mio cuore di zingara!

Paula Schöpf

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[61] From the collection *La mendicante dei sogni* (Bolzano: Atelier grafico, 1997). I AM A GYPSY. I am a Gypsy / I, a Gypsy, the queen of creation / In the morning with a wave I make the sun rise / The rain caresses my body with the freshness of its eyes / The dew quenches my lips and fills me with the intense scent of infinity / Every tiny living being delights my thought with its music / and floods my blood with honey, the wind courts / my hair where it hides itself, mysterious and passionate lover. / I am a Gypsy princess of the seas and the rivers, my skin smells / of moss and ripe wheat. / I am Gypsy emperess of the forests and the valleys, of ski and love, / love that springs from mud and moss / and goes to sleep among the hay's fragrance. / I am a Gypsy, I am freedom, I hold the moon with one hand an the sun with the other / I have no home nor flag but the world is at my feet. / I am a Gypsy, in the moonlit I use to lean my head on the mountains / while the guitar in love quivering caresses / my Gypsy heart! (my translation).

ME SEM MAJ ZURALO[62]

Me sem maj zuralo,
Rom vaćarel.
Me sem maj slobodno
po tselo them.

Tala e zvijezde sovav
ćisto vazduh udiši
sa e šukar thana
me dikhav i obidži.

Sogod si ma
ande mi kampina si
bešav pala mo vurdon
resav kote kaj misli.

Me ćavore si bahtale
pe umalja kana ćelen pe
i me sem bahtalo
kaj Rom sem.

SONO IL PIÙ FORTE

Sono il più forte,
dice lo Zingaro.
Sono il più libero
per il mondo.

dormo sotto le stelle
respiro aria pura
tutti i più bei posti
vedo e visito.

Tutto quello che ho
È nel mio carrozzone
Sto nel mio carro
E vado dove penso.

I miei bimbi sono felici
Sulle colline dove giocano
E io sono felice
Di essere Zingaro.

Rasim Sejdić

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[62] I AM THE STRONGEST. I am the strongest / says the Gypsy / I am the most free man in the world / I sleep under the open sky / I breath fresh air / I have seen and I visit / all the most beautiful places / All my belongings are on my cart / I stay in my cart / And I go wherever I want / My children are happy / on the hills where they can play / And I am happy / to be a Gypsy. See R. Sejdić, *Rasim poeta zingaro* (Rho: Publi and Press, 1987); my translation.

In these poems the main source of the Romani self-celebration lies in the privileged relationship with Nature and the elements. Unlike Western urban society, which has considerably weakened this primal link by confining its population to a 'prison with bars',[63] Romani society has always enjoyed a harmonious relationship with the realm of Nature – in contrast with the situation of conflict undergone by the Roma within 'civilized' society. As already seen in Chapters 1 and 2, the Gağe's textual representations tend to portray the relationship between the 'Gypsies' and Nature in a symbolic, intellectualized fashion. These depictions are clearly influenced by a number of philosophical or political theories, in particular by Romanticism, in which Nature represents a mirror on which to project the deepest emotions of the individual. To the Gağe, Nature is generally seen as an external entity – in terms of landscape, environment, scenery – ontologically distinct from humanity. In the eyes of the Roma, by contrast, Nature is not subjected to any form of intellectual or material domestication, but is rather perceived as an entity with autonomous life with which they are able to establish an authentic, empathic relationship. The ballads by Papusza may be considered a clear example of this special association.

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[63] See Spinelli's *Son of the wind*: The roof protecting me now makes me small / and these walls / so well-built / with the windows / trap me behind flowers: / a prison with bars (the full version of the poem is provided at p. 250).

VEŠESKRI GILI[64]

Ach, mire veša!
Na parudźomby andre sveto baro
ni pal so, pale sovnakaja
i laćhe bara.
Bo laćhe bara
keren šukar jaga
i but pšeperen pal lendyr
manuša.

A mire bergi barytka
i paśe pani bara
drogedyr syr kućbara,
kaj keren duda.

Andre miro veš raćenca
paśe ćhon caćonys jaga,
dènys dud syr laćhe bara,
kaj manuša lidźan pre vasta.

Ach, mire kochana veša,
kaj pachnison sasto!
Kicy tume romane ćhavoren barjakirde,
syr kušča tumare tykne!
A dźesa syr patrynasa balval ćalavel,
Dźi nićhestyr na darel.
Ćhavore gila bagen,
čy trosale, čy bokhale
chten i khelen, bo veš len
adźa syklakirdza.

This well-known poem is significant for a number of reasons. First of all, it is centred on the above-mentioned Nature/Rom 'filiation', which recurs frequently in Romani poetry. '*Oh my land, my forests, I am your daughter*', writes the poetess in the song *My Land*; '*I grew up upon you, in your moss I was born*'. This close relationship is emphasized through the attribution of anthropomorphic traits to

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[64] A FOREST SONG. Ah, my forests, / For nothing in the world / Would I give you away / Neither for gold / Nor for precious stones / Flashing with wondrous flames / And filling men with delight. / And my stony mountains / And boulders at the water / Are dearer than gems / Gleaming with brilliant light. / And in my forest at night / Bonfires burn in the moonlight / And sparkle like precious stones / Which decorate women's hands. / Ah, my forest beloved / Smelling of health, / How many little Gypsies you have raised / As your own little shrubs! / The wind moves the heart like leaves. / But the soul is not afraid. / The children sing a song. / Whether thirsty or hungry, / They jump and dance / For the forest has taught them. Quoted from the article by Mariusz Cybulski 'Papusza and Her Poems', in *Lacio Drom*, 6 (1985), 21-31 (pp. 27-28); translation by Mariusz Cybulski.

Nature and its elements: the woods, the earth and the water 'sing', the sun is 'in love with the earth', whose 'black body' is fertile.

The Gypsy girl travels among the natural world engaging in a continuous dialogue with the woods, the rivers and the fields. Nature, not humanity, seems to be her primary interlocutor. Moreover, Nature functions as a protective refuge from the hostility and the indifference displayed by humans.[65] It is a sort of living being with an identity of its own. In the poem *Gili Romani* (Romani song) the forest 'shivers' with joy or sadness, and Nature seems to participate in the frame of mind of the Gypsy girl. She identifies herself with Nature, in which she hopes to find consolation and relief from her sorrows.

It is worth noting that in Romani poetry Nature is not merely a symbolic intermediary between outward reality and humans' inner feelings. Typically, Nature is seen as a compassionate, sympathetic being with its own language and emotions. This is why the Roma turn to this motherly figure in the most critical times of life, especially in the moment of death. In the following poem by Paula Schöpf the murder of an innocent child, at first perceived as cruel and unreasonable, is re-interpreted as his symbolic rejoining and immersion in nature, that is, the original dimension to which he belongs (eyes / mouth / unripe fruit returned to the earth).

'Ricordo un bimbo che pensava
Che il mondo fosse piccolo con un cuore immenso
...Che sentiva la tristezza dell'acqua e il gemito del vento
Cadere sulla neve nella sera senza domani
E sorrideva con il sole negli occhi
Con uno specchietto rifletteva la vita prigioniera del tempo
Spuntarono dall'ombra come nere farfalle
Quattro cavalieri con bianchi cavalli

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[65] The lack of understanding surrounding the Roma is particularly meaningful as it is lamented by a female voice. Romani women are excluded from the hegemonic discourse both within the dominant society – as members of a despised minority – and also within their own group. This twofold marginalization cannot fail to affect female authors' writings, which are often characterized by a sorrowful, irremediable sense of loneliness and isolation.

Che decretarono la sua morte perché reo d'esser nato
Nessuno li vide
Fu silenzioso e veloce il passaggio della morte
Nel piccolo accampamento
...Quel corpicino immobile
Lontano ormai dall'odio e dalla collera
Solo e disarmato incontro alla morte
Pensavo alla sua bocca piena di terra
Alla sua bocca piena di rimpianto
Per aver creduto a un mondo dal cuore immenso
Occhi
Bocca
Frutti resi alla terra ancora acerbi[66]

In the following verse by Luminița Mihai-Cioabă the Rom/Nature relation is attributed a magic connotation. The poet introduces us to a dimension where the sense of time is nullified and the fusion of man and environment is complete. These are poems in which trees 'weep' and boughs 'tremble', the whole sky if 'filled with weeping' and humans metamorphose into horses and 'wrap' themselves in stars. This magic conflation of the natural realm with the human dimension is grounded in a profound affinity, a symbiotic association which can only be expressed in the language of poetry:

'o văş athaveltu acharăltu
ta ateara-ma kă grastoro văşuno
(...)
thai marau andoa punro
e duk nachăl ande kă dili
o duma ande poezia

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[66] From P. Schöpf, *La mendicante dei sogni*. I REMEMBER A CHILD. I remember a child / Who thought this was a small world with a giant heart / (...) Who felt the sadness in the water and the moaning of the wind / Falling on the snow in the night with no tomorrow / And when he smiled there was sun in his eyes / He used a little mirror to reflect life, a prisoner of time / Then they came from the shadows like black butterflies / Four knights on white horses who decreed / Death because he was guilty of having been born / No one saw them / The passage of death was quick and silent / In the little campground / (...) That still little body now so far away from the hate and the anger / Alone and unarmed against death / I thought of his mouth full of dirt / Of his mouth full of regret for having believed in a world with a giant earth / Eyes / Mouth / Unripe fruit returned to the earth (trans. by Minna Proctor).

you seem to feel how the Forest in a charm is calling you
so that meseems I change into a little wild horse
(...)
my hooves secretely clattering in my flight
and sorrow's changing into a song
speech in poetry'.[67]

In the poem *O ćhonut* (The moon) by Rajko Djurić, this symbiosis is depicted as a merciful embrace between the beaming moon and the weeping Gypsies gathered around the fire:

O ĆHONUT[68]

O ćhonut asal
amen
trujal e jag
rovas
O rovipe urăvel
o asape mekhlŏl tele
O d'el khandel p-o rovipe
amen p-o asape
Te o ćhonut korravòla
te amen dikhàsa
kon vakarèla
Kaj e phak e rovimasqe
thaj e asamasqe
ka arakhandon

La lune rit
nous
autour du feu
pleurons
Les sanglots s'élèvent
le rire descend
Le firmament a une odeur de pleurs
nous un parfum de rire
Si la lune perd la vue
et si nos yeux s'ouvrent
qui donc saura dire
où l'aile des pleurs
et celle du rire
se rencontreron.

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[67] L. Mihai-Cioabă, *O angluno la phuveako*. English translation by Mircea Ivănescu.

[68] R. Djurić, *Sans maison sans tombe* (Paris: Études Tsiganes/L'Harmattan, 1990). THE MOON. The moon laughs / We / Around the fire / Cry / The weeping rises / The laughter descends / The firmament smells of crying / We smell of laughter / If the moon loses her sight / And our eyes will open wide / Who in the end can tell / Where the wing of crying / And the wing of laughing / will meet again; my translation.

The dominant images in 'naturalistic' Romani poetry are images of movement, fluidity and transience. In a poem devoted to the forest, Papusza compares the Gypsies with the wandering water in order to suggest the idea of movement, and the two terms of the comparison blend together to become an indistinguishable unity. Only a nomadic people can experience such an intense identification with the natural realm.

Since nomadism has been hampered and forbidden, the yearning to move lives on in the sad recollection of a distant past. This brings us back to Papusza's late songs, which testify to the policy of forced settlement of her people. Her ballads, although aimed at celebrating what is at the very heart of the Romani life, are mostly characterized by a sense of nostalgia for a condition vanished forever. They refer to a moment of uncertainty and transition from a traditional way of life to a life governed by the laws of modernity. On the other hand, contemporary Romani poetry – in which the role of tradition is still crucial – displays a confident affirmation of Romani identity, whose inimitable features are epitomized by the so-called *Romanipè*.

(ii.ii) Romanipè/'Gypsiness': the quest for a common Romani identity

ROM[69]	**ZINGARO**
Rom, Rom, Rom...	Zingaro, zingaro, zingaro...
So a sì ni Rom?	che cosa è uno zingaro?
Rom a sì drom...	Zingaro è strada...
Rom a sì thèm...	Zingaro è mondo...
Rom a sì khàm...	Zingaro è sole...
Rom a sì bravàl...	Zingaro è vento...
Rom a sì ćiar...	Zingaro è erba...
Rom a sì jilò...	Zingaro è cuore...
Rom a sì sabbè...	Zingaro è sorriso...
Rom a sì śukuàr...	Zingaro è bello...
Rom a sì laćiò...	Zingaro è buono...
Rom a sì dukkaddipè...	Zingaro è dolce...
Rom a sì kalipè...	Zingaro è lutto...
Rom a sì miśtipè...	Zingaro è amore...
Rom a sì laććipè...	Zingaro è purezza...
Rom a sì purraddipè...	Zingaro è esuberanza...
Rom a sì phralipè...	Zingaro è amore fraterno...
Rom a sì issipè...	Zingaro è furbizia...
Rom a sì... Rom!	Zingaro è... uomo!

Santino Spinelli

Romanipè is the title of a collection of poems published by Spinelli in 1993. His work represents an attempt to provide a literary definition of the pivotal features of Romani identity, whose affirmation is considered indispensable to establish a sense of community clearly distinct from the non-Romani population. This effort is connected with a broader strategy pursued by Romani intellectuals – among whom Spinelli is very active – aimed at reasserting the Roma's view of their own culture, neglected for such a long time. One of the main objectives of the Romani intelligentsia is the deconstruction of stereotypes about the 'Gypsies', which have seriously prevented the establishment of a proper dialogue between Roma and Gağe. On the other hand, the intellectuals are engaged in an effort to foster awareness of the

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[69] From S. Spinelli, *Romanipè / Ziganità*.

historical and cultural roots of their people. The rise of a written literature plays an important role in this process of identity-building, as testified by Spinelli's work.

Most of Spinelli's poetry aims to depict not only the sad reality of genocide and social marginalization, but also what he perceives as the main constituents, the 'heart' of Romani culture: the family, filial love and the 'Gypsy wealth', as the poet defines it, which is not estimated on the basis of material standards, but consists of appreciation for small things and closeness to nature. A meaningful example of the 'ethnic autopoiesis' performed by the author is the poem *Bravalipè/Ricchezza Zingara* (Gypsy riches).

BRAVALIPÈ ROMANÒ[70]

U divès a sim u khàm
ta dutarelammáng u drom
ta šurdè panì lenanè
pi ta dàv ta pièl ku karlò mirò;
a sim i braval, dat tri li thèm mirè,
ta čiangavelammàng mri čingirdè sunè

ta rùk sdinè pi ta rišurdaràv
u bar sovibbè mirò;
i ràt a sim i jàkh
ta tatarelammàng sassarò,
šukuàr gilià di čiliklè
pi ta šunam fiddèr,
čiàr šungì pi ta bučinàv
li sabbè mirè;
andrè i ràt barì a sim i čion dutalì

ta šunelammàng u bašaddipè 'nguldò
ta ni fald di šukuàr duturjà sunakà
pi ta čiaràv li sunè mirè,
ni duturì piribbinjàngr angiàl
ki li kià a sim pi ta
dèl làv di mištipè
ku mru jilò lačio ta bi nafel.

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[70] GYPSY RICHES. In daytime the sun / lights up my way / And fresh, streaming waters / quench my thirst; / the wind, father of my skies, / caresses my untamed thoughts / and tall tree refresh my rest; / At night the fire / warms up intensely my limbs, / sweet chirping of birds livens up my spirit, / scented grass lulls my smiles; / in the dark night the moon spreads her light / and listens to my sweet melody and a mantle of golden stars / wrap up my dreams, / a shooting star before me / teaches my loyal and sincere heart / how to love. From S. Spinelli, *Romanipè / Ziganità*; my translation.

RICCHEZZA ZINGARA

Il giorno ho il sole
che mi illumina la via
e fresche ruscellanti acque
per dissetare la mia gola;
ho il vento, padre dei miei cieli,
che accarezza i miei indomabili pensieri

e alti alberi per rinfrescare
il profondo mio riposo;
la sera ho il fuoco
che riscalda intenso le mie membra,
dolci cinguettii di uccelli
per rinsaldare lo spirito,
erba profumata per dondolare
i miei sorrisi;
nella notte profonda ho la luna propagatrice di luce

che ascolta la mia dolce melodia
e un mantello di stelle dorate
per coprire i miei sogni,
una stella cadente innanzi
ai miei occhi per
impartire lezioni d`amore
al mio cuore leale e sincero.

The poet enumerates the pivotal components of this wealth, namely, the essence of Romani identity, which mostly belong to the realm of Nature, such as the sun (*o khàm*), the wind (*o bravàl*), but also fire (*o jàkh*), the songs of the birds, the light of the moon, and the stars. Nature seems to be more than a mere background to the life of the Roma: it provides for all their needs, both the material and the spiritual ones. As in early Romani poetry, Nature is conceived as mother, and this `filiation` is stressed throughout Spinelli`s works by the recurrent expression `son of the wind`.

CIAVÒ DI BRAVÀL[71]

Imè ciavò di bràvàl,
dat di bar drom...
Bar ciar mrù dommà a lià,
dox di grast tsoralè
ta sukuàr gilipè di ciliklè
mri khàn a sunjè.
Tarnè ruk a ningiriè
mrù drom barò,
ta panì ta cikkà
ta thèm ta khàm
ta dùt ta tatipè
andrè li dives mirè;
ni 'ngiràt sinè mrù khèr,
sunasinèm barò!
U tit ta kanà a simm
kirem tifunurò
ta kalà mùr kirdè
kiàl laccè
ki li firiddià
ki li sungèngr a starènm,
sàr andrè ni staribbè!
Ni giungalì gilì
Di ciliklò bi nàv
Ki firìd a karèmm;
ni ciliklò bi nàv
ta bi kakià
kirèl pi tà nasèl,
ni dàb andrè
u nist tru kuwìt.
Sàr ni panurò ta pirèl
maskaràl ki lèn a cià,
ta na ninguà ta làv li rìv
pi ta kiràl mirè.
U panì ningirdò
ki bravàl tri li dàt
akà ningiriammàng li sunè mirè.
Ni vèl a cii ningaddì
ta akà imè a cijòml
sàr ma sinè ni bandièr.

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[71] From S. Spinelli, *Romanipè / Ziganità*. SON OF THE WIND. I, son of the wind / Father of the long walk... / The vast plains of grass my back has touched, / the breath of powerful horses / and the sweet song of birds / my ears have heard. / Green trees have guided / My never ending walk, / and waters and lands / and skies and sun / and light and heat / the days I've lived; / a tent was my home: / I felt free. / The roof protecting me now makes me small / and these walls / so well-built / with the windows / trap me behind flowers: / a prison with bars. / The hoarse-voiced song / of a bird with no name / draws me to the window; a bird / unkown / wings disfigured / it attempts to fly, / but splashes into / empty silence, / like a drop that falls / into the river where I am floating – / I can't reach the banks / to proclaim them mine. / Water driven / by the wind of the fathers / brought my dream here – / a veil has been lowered / and I planted it here, / as if it were a flag (trans. by Minna Proctor).

FIGLIO DEL VENTO

Io figlio del vento,
padre di lungo cammino...
Vaste distese erbose la mia schiena ha toccato,
fiati di poderosi cavalli
e dolci cinguettii di uccelli
le mie orecchie hanno udito.
Verdi alberi hanno guidato
il mio interminabile cammino,
e acque e terre
e cieli e sole
e luce e calore
nei miei giorni vissuti;
una tenda era il mio nido,
mi sentivo libero!
Il tetto che or mi protegge
mi rimpicciolisce
e queste pareti
così ben costruite
con le finestre
in fiore mi imprigionano,
una gabbia di sbarre!
Un rauco cinguettio
di uccello senza nome
alla finestra mi attira; un uccello
sconosciuto
con le ali deturpate
tenta un volo,
un tonfo nel
vuoto silenzio.
Come una goccia che cade
nel fiume galleggio,
non riesco a toccare le sponde
per proclamarle mie.
Le acque spinte
dal vento dei padri
qui hanno portato i miei sogni.
Una vela è stata ammainata
e qui, io l'ho piantata
come fosse una bandiera.

Spinelli's poems are illustrative of the Roma's tendency to define themselves by using images related to a past time, a mythical 'golden age' during which the Roma used to lead an undisturbed, harmonious life. The emphasis on these typical (and widely used) representations, encapsulated by expressions such as 'son of the wind', the '*Romanò bravalipè*', the '*gili Romani*' – but also the 'forgotten Holocaust', the 'broken violin' and other poignant metaphors – echoes the mechanism at the root of

oral narrative, whose salient feature is to rely on formulaic expressions that are functional to memorization and to the storage of knowledge. By evoking such typical images, the poet achieves a poignant description of what he perceives as a kind of 'cultural hallmark' opposed to the characteristics of the majority society.

The emphasis on highly conventional features raises a fundamental issue. It may be easily observed that the self-representations of the Roma have a lot in common with some of the literary representations elaborated by the Gağe. Why is it that the poets seem to reintroduce the fictitious representations that have contributed to the 'ethnic camouflage' of the Roma? Undoubtedly, the depictions by Romani poets analysed above present the reader with some familiar *topoi* characterizing the aesthetics of the 'fictional Gypsy'. In fact, Romani written poetry could be considered in some respect as the symbolic 'space' where hetero-ascribed images and self-representations interact and mingle with one another. What is essential is the symbolic significance of this textual hybridization. By re-interpreting the traits and imagery with which they have been associated in the mind of the Gağe, the Roma perform a *critical appropriation* of their fictional image. The 'mirroring effect' is therefore only superficial, as this image is invested by the authors with a new symbolic meaning. This 'semantic twist' can be detected in a poem by the Rom Xoraxanė Šemšo Advić, which provides us with a typical example of the aforementioned textual 'hybridization'.

RAĆ PEREL[72]

Bešav the dikhav but řomane kampine
kalipé,
ni dikhinjavol o naj paša jakhá,
angla svako kampina phabol e jag.
Sa bez bržin prasten the asan.
Ašunjavon e čemane,
sjetno bašalen e řomane ğiljá.
Svako ko ašunel veselipé
the uživin ande lende
ali ni ğanen kaj amen e Řomá
ande svako ğilí rová te ispoljí amarí tuga.
I von nikad ni ka ğanen
kaj uživin ande amarí tuga.

SCENDE LA SERA

Siedo e guardo i carrozzoni degli Zingari
è buio,
innanzi ad ogni carrozzone arde un fuoco.
Tutti senza problemi corrono e ridono.
Si odono i violini,
suonano con melanconia canzoni zingare.
Chi ascolta si rallegra
ma non sa che noi Zingari
in ogni canzone piangiamo
per far uscire da noi la nostra tristezza.
Essi non sapranno mai
che gioiscono della nostra tristezza.

The poet describes a 'topical' scene set in a Gypsy camp, whose main components are the cart, the fire illuminating the impending darkness, the music of the violins. The atmosphere is of extreme gaiety: everybody in the camp seems to be cheerful and untroubled. To an outsider, observes the poet, this scene may inspire feelings of peacefulness and aesthetic enjoyment. In fact, one may easily notice evident analogies with a number of idyllic depictions of 'Gypsy' life, as that found in Pushkin's *Tsygani*, where 'Gypsy' characters epitomize a natural state still

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[72] THE NIGHT IS FALLING. I sit and watch the Gypsy caravans / it is dark, / a fire is burning in front of each cart. / Everybody runs and smiles carelessly. / You can hear the violins / playing melancholic Gypsy songs. / The people who listen are amused / but they do not know that we, the Roma / in every song we cry / we express our sadness. / They will never know / that they take pleasure from our sadness. From the collection *Poesie*; translated from *romanes* by Sergio Franzese, English translation mine.

untouched by civilization. But the Romani poet warns us against simplistic interpretations of this kind, emphasizing that what may look like the portrait of perfect happiness and freedom is in reality pervaded by a sense of sadness and despair. To live 'the Romani way' implies an endless series of difficulties and deprivation, a condition which is in dramatic contrast with the romantic representations of the 'Gypsies', as this poem by Aladin Sejdić[73] shows:

ĞI KAJ KA NAŠÁV?[74]

Umál ği ke umál,
Than ği ki than,
Manúš ği ko manúš.
Avrí sováv, čoráv, mangáv,
E dromenca nasáv.
E dromenca phurilém.
Mo than ni arakhlém,
Ke len avilém,
Pe barí umál bešlém,
Mi cahra unzardém,
Mi jagorí phabardén.
Kaj dikháv,
E paćardé avén.
Bi iljehko mi cahra peravén,
Mi jagorí pexnenca uštaven
Mudarén!

Našáv, pe mo vordón bešáv,
Mi cahra mukáv,
Me čhavoxén te našaláv,
Andar o gav and gav nakháv,
Angla ma e gağé phandén po udár,
Me ğav
Me nakháv,
Me rováv,
The me man phučáv:
'Ği kaj ka našáv?'

Marko Aladin Sejdić

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[73] Born in Sarajevo, Aladin Sejdić is the son of the poet Rasim Sejdić.

[74] HOW FAR WILL I RUN? Field after field, / place after place, / Man after man. / I sleep in the open, I steal, I beg / Fleeing across the roads / Growing old on the roads. / I did not find my own place, / I go down to the river, / I camp in the vast field, / I raise my tent, / I light the fire... / I see / The police coming, / They unmercifully knock down my tent, / They stamp on the fire, / They extinguish it. / I seek refuge on my cart, / I leave the tent / To save my children. / I run across villages / Where the gagé slam the door in my face. / I wander, / Across Places, / I cry / And ask myself: / "How far will I run?". From the collection *Me aváv durál / Io vengo da lontano* (Milan: ISU, 2000); my translation.

FIN DOVE SCAPPERÒ?

Prato dopo prato,
Posto dopo posto,
Uomo dopo uomo.
Dormo all'addiaccio, rubo, mendico
Scappando per le strade
Invecchiando per le strade.
Il mio posto non ho trovato,
Scendo al fiume,
Mi accampo sul grande prato,
Alzo la tenda,
Accendo il fuoco…

Vedo
La polizia venire,
Rovesciano senza pietà la mia tenda,
Calpestano il fuoco,
Lo spengono.

Scappo sul mio carro,
Abbandono la tenda
Per salvare i miei figli,
Attraverso i villaggi
Dove i gagé mi chiudono la porta in faccia.
Vago,
Attraverso luoghi,
Piango
E mi chiedo:
'Fin dove scapperò?'

Every Rom is deeply aware of the precariousness and instability of his/her situation due to the conflicting nature of the Roma/Gağe relation. If the presence of the Gağe is necessary to the very existence of the Roma, it is also a threatening menace to their survival as a separate group within the majority society. By providing the reader with an alternative, 'emic' interpretation of the text, the poets succeed in shifting the focus from the fictional image to the cognitive mechanism which lies at its root: it is precisely at this deeper level that we have to situate the analysis of the poetic self-representations of the Roma. What is at issue here is not the simple opposition betwen 'false' and 'truthful' images, but the underlying *symbolic opposition* between Roma and Gağe.

As anthropologists point out, ethnic and cultural identity emerges and is performed *contrastively*, by distinguishing ourselves from an Alterity.[75] In the case of the Roma, the 'Other' by definition is represented by the Gağe. Since the distinction from the Gağe Alterity is perpetually threatened by cultural assimilation, the Roma's self-definition needs to be constantly confirmed and negotiated: the act of autopoiesis is an ongoing process implying the constant construction and redefinition of the Gağe/Roma polarity. This creative opposition is also at work in the texts of many Romani poets, who interpret it as an opposition between the way of life of the Gağe – which is seen as materialistic and lacking in authenticity – and the Romani way of life, centred on the principles and values of a people that refuses to assimilate completely into the dominant society.

The poetic reaffirmation of Romani diversity is particularly powerful in the poems devoted to the celebration of the dignity of the Rom. The tone here is emphatic. '*Rom sim*', 'I am a Rom', 'I am a Romni' are sentences frequently placed at the very beginning of the compositions, as to give authority to the identification. In these poems the written text is almost conceived as a metaphorical 'mirror' in which the poet gazes at herself/himself: the image reflected by the mirror is generally endowed with attributes of emphatic realism, which may be equated to an energetic act of self-assertion. Such is the image of the 'dark Rom' emerging from a considerable number of poems, which are aimed at highlighting the main features of Romani identity emphasizing its profound, inalienable dignity:

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[75] See Chapter 5.i.

Njigda tut ma ladža,
kaj kalo Rom sal,
sem oda njič,
kaj kalo Rom sal.
Pre kalji phuv
o žužodživ barol
vas o parno maro.
O kalo manuš
the e kalji phuv
paš peste ačhol.

Non vergognarti mai
di essere un Rom nero,
che importa
se sei un Rom nero.
Dalla terra nera
nasce il grano
per il pane bianco.
L'uomo nero
e la terra nera
stanno bene insieme.

Marta Bandyova[76]

The poet seems to call for an act of full, unconditional acceptance of the Romani diversity and finds its dignity precisely in what the Gağe consider its less 'desirable' feature: the colour black.[77] The whole poem is structured around the purposeful reversal of the cultural and ethnic traits that are mostly rejected and stigmatized by the majority society. When affirming 'I am a Rom/ni', poets do not limit themselves to a self-explanatory statement: they emphasize their *diversity* from the rest of society. They seem to take a stand, to declare their position in the struggle for the control of Romani identity. This '*pris de conscience*' presupposes the perception of a shared identity on which their common claims may be grounded.

After being confined for centuries within the fictional images of the 'Gypsies', the actual Roma have become almost invisible. This is emphasized by the Roma

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[76] Never be ashamed / of being a black Rom, / who cares / if you are a black Rom. / From the black earth / comes the wheat / for the white bread. / The black man / and the black earth / get on well together. See M. Karpati (ed.), *Zingari ieri e oggi*, p. 208; my translation.

[77] This reference to the black colour should be interpreted in a broad, metaphorical sense, as a symbol of the Roma's distinctiveness.

themselves, and in a recent publication Ian Hancock considers it necessary to point out that the Roma are a 'real' people.[78] Dispersed among the Gağe and increasingly isolated due to restricting policies and lack of communication, the Romani groups are faced with a constant threat to their unity as a people. The crucial role played by poetry in fostering the sense of a common Romani identity is well illustrated by this poem by Jorge M.F. Bernard:[79]

'Rom sim, kodjà sa ʒanglèm,
Kalderàś, dekin biànʒilem vi
kadò sićilèm.
Ma, but ći ʒanàvas.
Bojaśès dikhlèm, mange Rom nas, gaʒò;
Xitanòs prin ardèm, sar gaʒèske vi les lem
Xoraxanès, vurićisardèm.
Će śiba dènas dúma?
Katàr avenas kakalà manús?
...
Rom sam amè; Xitànuria, Romà
vaj Ludàr, ći sam.
Dilò simas, ći kamàvas o ćidinimòs,
ći primívas murè narodòs,
...
so kerdàn?, će phralorèn gonisardàn?,
kàna amè sam sàmo jekh.
Aśkenazim, Sefaradim!,
Nord-Sud, opré-telé!,
Na maj keren kodja, Manuśàle!,
Aj tumé maj xanci, Romàlé!,
Rom sam amé, serèn kodja!,
Sićilèm, ek naròdo.
So ci ʒanàvas me!...

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[78] Ian Hancock, *We are the Romany People*, pp. 67-68. See also the poets mentioned later in this chapter (p. 276).

[79] I am a Rom, I have always been aware of that, / and a Kalderàs since I was born, / I also knew this. / But there were a lot of things I did not know, / I saw a Bojas, I thought he was not a Gypsy, to me he was a gagò; / I met a Spanish Rom, I mistook him for a gagò, / I met a Rom Xorxanò, I despised him. / What kind of language did they speak? / Where these people came from? / Are we Rom, Xitanuria, Romà / or Ludàr? / We are nobody. / I was a fool / I did not want unity, / I did not accept my people. / What have you done? Did you expel your brothers / When we are the same people? / Ashkenazi, Sephardi! / Nord-Sud, up-down! / Oh Manuśa, I will never do it again! / We are Roma, remember! / I have learnt that we are the same people. / I have learnt what I did not know. Extracted from the poem *So ći ʒanàvas me* (What I did not know). Published in S. Spinelli (ed.), *Baxtalo Drom / Felice Cammino I*; my translation.

Sono Gitano, questo lo seppi sempre,
Calderaro da quando nacqui,
pure lo seppi.
Ma tanto non sapevo,
vidi un Bojas, per me non era zingaro, era un gagò.
Conobbi un Gitano, lo presi per un gagò.
Conobbi uno Xorxanò, lo disprezzai.
Che lingua parlavano?
Da dove veniva questa gente?
…
Siamo Gitani, Rom, Xitanuria,
Romà o Ludar? Non siamo.
Ero uno stupido, non volevo l'unione,
Non accettavo il mio popolo,
…
Che facesti? Espellesti i tuoi fratelli
Quando siamo un popolo solo?
Ashkenazi, Sefaradi!
Nord-Sud, sopra-sotto!
Non lo farò più, Gitani!,
Siamo Gitani, ricordatelo!,
Appresi… un popolo.
Ciò che io non sapevo!…'

We note here a significant shift from the first person situated at the beginning of the poem (*I* am a Gypsy) to a collective 'we' (*We* are Gypsies, remember!), as to emphasize the crucial link between individual identity and group membership. The group identity needs to be continuously reaffirmed and redefined not only in order to gain external recognition, but also to foster a sense of self-awareness among the Romani people. This is why the agonistic, deconstructive function characterizing the literature of the Roma is inextricably connected with their literary autopoiesis. By opposing the Gağe's misrepresentations, the Roma contemporaneously establish and strengthen their identity as a people.

(ii.iii) The female voice

Throughout this chapter we have repeatedly underlined the role of writing in supporting the manifestation of Romani identity and promoting the establishment of a higher sense of unity among the Roma. These are functions which may be included in the 'macro-purposes' of writing.[80] However, it is also important to reflect on the uses of writing by Romani authors for 'micro-purposes' of self-representation. This section deals with this crucial phenomenon, dwelling especially on the use of writing by Romani female authors, whose specific features provide us with a significant insight into a neglected reality which may nevertheless contribute to our understanding of the multifarious configuration of Romani identity. The section focuses on two authors, Nada Braidic and Paula Schöpf. I had the honour of establishing personal contacts with both authors. I first met Nada Braidic in 1995 while working on a thesis on the use of writing in her group, the Slovenian-Croatian Roma. Since then I have visited her regularly and had extended discussions about her activity as a poet and a cultural mediator. The poet Paula Schöpf I met for the first time in 2002 through the help of the anthropologist Elisabeth Tauber. I was able to conduct a series of formal and informal interviews with her; we also exchanged letters and had a number of telephone conversations. Despite focusing on these two authors, some of the following remarks and interpretations have a more general validity and may be referred to female writers of other groups and epochs. This is not to say that the problems faced by women – or the ways they address these problems – are necessarily the same in all Romani groups. As in the case of women's issues in majority society, it is essential to refrain from the use of sweeping

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[80] See R. Clark and R. Ivanič, *The Politics of Writing*, pp. 107-133.

generalizations when analysing Romani female writing. Any attempt to define and classify precisely women writers in Romani society is doomed to failure, as there is no such thing as a general category of 'womanhood' able to account for the multifaceted expression of women's issues and their interpretation of female social role(s). For this reason the following analysis deals with specific cases, rather than dwelling upon abstract definitions and categorizations.

Nada Braidic belongs to a small Slovenian-Croatian intelligentsia – mainly young women educated in the Gağe's schools – who are actively involved in the divulgation of the most misinterpreted aspects of their culture, in the effort to promote a better knowledge of their culture among the Gağe. A great number of these women are 'cultural mediators', that is, they have been specifically trained to carry out precise tasks within a multicultural educational context. Their role is to assist the families of Romani children in dealing with bureaucratic formalities, and to facilitate the exchange of information between the parties involved in the schooling process. Besides, they play a crucial role as intermediaries in the psychosocial Roma/Gağe polarisation, providing an important link between the two cultures. Since the introduction of this innovatory educational method a significant increase in school attendance has been reported among Roma, not to mention an improvement in relations between teachers and families. Although the cultural mediators have not yet been istitutionalized and their educational function is still controversial, they are an important instance of the strategic role of female liminality[81] in the creation of new opportunities for 'cultural interchange'. Women's crucial capacity to act as mediators between Roma and Gağe institutions and to use the written code, however, is not considered a prestigious achievement by the members of their group. As for

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[81] See Chapter 5.iv.

the majority of the Roma, literacy practices are considered merely instrumental activities (see Chapter 3) and are regarded with suspicion as they bear the ethnic connotation of the Gağe. It is the liminal position of women in this group that explains their role as mediators and writers, not their dominant position. In reality, for Gypsy women the use of writing is far from being a marginal, strictly instrumental activity. They tend to regard writing as a central component of their identity and succeed in converting their liminality into a literary 'niche' within which to express their specific issues.

The analysis of the condition of women in Romani society reveals the existence of a system of rigorous rules and beliefs which burden their social lives with numerous restrictions. Among the Slovenian-Croatian Roma, for example, the necessity to ensure the perpetuation of the group and the male predominance within it implies the imposition of strict limitations on women, not only within their membership group, but also in the relationship with non-Roma. In the first instance, the subjection of women is fulfilled through their subordination in marriage, as they are not allowed any autonomous power to make decisions and they cannot challenge male authority under any circumstances. As far as her behaviour within the group is concerned, a woman is subject to a sharp seclusion between the sexes and a number of restricting taboos. Despite the severe control of the group on them, women are required to go every day among the Gağe to help support their families.[82] This means that they dwell in a space in-between their society and that of the Gağe, and they tend to be perceived as potentially 'dangerous' not only by the non-Roma (in so far as members

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[82] Among the activities usually performed by women are fortune-telling, door-to-door selling, collection of scrap and second-hand goods.

of a 'deviant' group), but also by their own people, since women's exogamous association with the Gağe could lead to the assimilation of the Roma.[83]

All the limitations listed above impose a heavy restraint on women's self-expression, although they do not necessarily entail the complete saturation of any autonomous space. In fact, the female use of writing is one of the ways in which women can affirm effectively their 'alternative' cosmology, by creating a symbolic space still unconditioned by the established tradition, as in the case of the Romni Nada Braidic, whose poems display a creative, personal use of writing.

Her poems are mainly concerned with the traditional themes underlying a large part of Romani poetry. A sense of deep sadness runs through her verses, which are dominated by the unsurmountable Roma/Gağe opposition. The poet gives voice to the exclusion of her people from majority society, which she interprets in spatial terms. Racial discrimination determines their ban from the strategic *loci* of political and economic power. The Gağe, rulers of an arbitrary system of power, purposely exclude the Roma from any form of social interaction with them. They are not allowed to dwell even at the margins of the dominant society: there is simply no place where they can lead their life. Despised and marginalized, the Roma are represented as a people on the move, forced to escape from the wickedness and indifference of the Gağe. There seems to be an ontological distinction opposing the Roma, attached to simple values of communal and family life, to the Gağe, whose heart is 'like stone' (*cuore... come sasso*).

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[83] The perception of women as 'dangerous' and 'polluting' has been pointed out by J. Okely in her article 'Gypsy Women: Models in Conflict,' in S. Ardener (ed.), *Perceiving Women*, (London: Malaby, 1975), pp. 55-86. See also J. Okely, *The Traveller-Gypsies*, pp. 206-212.

Romani women are not only subjected to exclusion from majority society, but they have to experience a condition of seclusion and oppression *within their own group*:

ĞIUVLI ROMANI[84]

Ğiuvli Romani,
Ğiuvly Kukori,
sani taśade.

Ğiuvli Romani,
Ğiuvly Kukori,
sagnine ti lako kere su kame,
čingadn po tute
na len sastupine,
na tu sastupinen.

Ğiuvli Romani,
Ğiuvly Kukori,
nai šivieni su Kamse,
nai kava them su sagninse.

Andu peste
rode iere,
iere ğioke, iere tuke.

Hilo Andi them,
andu bersa su avna
iek kutači sa tro,
ti testi ove sar hignias
andre i avri?

Ğiuvli Romani,
Ğiuvly Kukori.

DONNA ROMANI

Donna Zingara,
Donna Solitudine,
sogni soffocati.

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[84] ROMANI WOMAN. Romani woman, / Woman of loneliness, / suppressed dreams. / Romani woman, / Woman of loneliness, / you dream of being free, / you only find reproaches / you do not understand them / they do not understand you. / Romani woman / Woman of loneliness, / this is not the life you wanted, / this is not the world you dreamt about. / You try to find the reason, / why it has to be like this, why you? / Is there anywhere in time / a place on your own / where you can be yourself / inside and outside yourself? From S. Spinelli, (ed.), *Šunge luluda / Fiori profumati* (Pescara: Italica, 1994); my translation.

Donna Zingara,
Donna Solitudine,
sogni la libertà,
trovi rimproveri
non li capisci,
non ti capiscono.

Donna Zingara,
Donna Solitudine,
non è questa la vita che volevi,
non è questo il mondo che sognavi.

Dentro di te cerchi il perché,
perché così, perché a te.

C'è nel mondo dentro il tempo
un angolo tutto tuo
dove essere te stessa
dentro e fuori di te?

Donna Zingara,
Donna Solitudine.

What is the dream of a Romni? For her it is essential to find a place where she is free to be herself, to be able to make her own decisions about how to live her life; to *express* herself *in her own way*. Unfortunately, any attempt to fulfil these needs clashes with an attitude of hostility and a basic lack of understanding. The Gypsy girl is trying to fight a lost battle. With nowhere to go and nobody to speak to, her wings violently torn away (*hanno strappato le tue ali*), she cries desperately. Forlorn and disenchanted, she has no choice but to withdraw into herself, hoping for a better future:

'Rov čai romani
i na giane sar keri
Kai ğial
koneha vacheri.

Rov čai romani
čnde tuke kreljuti
keči terpine!

Kana sov.
Hinias trudno su pe mari
i onda kon ğiani...
Taha lako ovi vavik aver!

Piangi ragazza zingara
mentre non sai come fare
dove andare
con chi parlare.

Piangi ragazza zingara
hanno strappato le tue ali
quanto male!
Ora dormi.
Sei stanca di lottare
e poi chissà...
il domani si può sempre cambiare!'[85]

Paula Schöpf, born in Bolzano in 1953, is a poet belonging to the Sinti Estrekharja. In her first collection *La mendicante dei sogni*, published in 1997, she sets out a pessimistic *Weltanschauung* centred on the conviction that there is an irreparable rift between the dominant society and the Roma. The latter live at the margins of the Gağe's socio-economic system and are unlikely to escape their condition of outcasts – Schöpf refers to a 'nation of beggars' (*popolo di mendicanti*). This is the condition of social 'invisibility' described by poets such as Spinelli (*Song of the invisible people*), Dezider Banga (*Tramps*), I. Šaban (*I was born in black suffering*) and Djurić (*Without House or Grave*).[86] The curse of social exclusion manifests itself primarily in terms of absence of communication. Silence, indifference, emptiness and darkness are the keynotes of the Roma/Gağe relationship. The poet's efforts are aimed at starting a dialogue with the non-Roma: '*Amico mio vorrei parlarti...*' '*Quante cose potrei dirti / (...) Se tu comprendessi la mia voce*' (My friend, I would like to talk to you.../ there are so many things I could tell you /...if you only understood my voice), but are unlikely to be successful – '*Ma*

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[85] ROMANI GIRL. Cry Romani girl / while you do not know what to do / where to go / who to talk to. / Cry Romani girl / they tore out your wings / how painful! / Now go to sleep. / You are tired of fighting / and then who knows... / tomorrow can be different! From the poem *Ćai romani / Ragazza zingara*, in S. Spinelli, (ed.), *Šunge luluda / Fiori profumati*, 37-38; English translation mine.

[86] All these poems have been published in the collection *The Roads of the Roma*.

tu / Mi puoi capire?' (but you / can you understand me?).[87] For this reason, Paula defines her poems as 'verses with no voice' (*versi senza voce*), that is, poems doomed to remain unheard and unread. The Gağe's failure to understand the voice of the poet is not simply caused by linguistic incomprehension, but is rather due to their unwillingness to establish a constructive interaction with the Other.

Interestingly, the poet laments the same lack of communication within the poet's group: '*nel buio scrivo fiumi di parole / Che nessuno mai leggerà / Che nessuno mai capirà / ... nessuno se ne accorge / È tutto chiuso / Nella mia notte*' (in the dark I write flows of words / which nobody will ever read / which nobody will ever understand / ... nobody takes notice / Everything is sealed / In my darkness)'.[88] Her isolation is absolute and hopeless: '*Sola / S'inoltra nel silenzio la mia anima / Pesante è la catena dei pensieri / Sola / Voglio restare sola / Come il vento nel deserto / Sola / Come la montagna nel suo silenzio assordante / Mi sazierò di solitudine*' (Alone/My soul enters the silence/The chain of my thoughts is heavy/Alone/I want to be alone/Like the wind in the desert/Alone/Like the mountain in its deafening silence/I will fill myself with solitude).[89]

CERCHERÒ[90]

Non cercherò l'amore né la vita
Solo la solitudine cercherò
Non cercherò rimpianti né ricordi
Nella tristezza annegherò la mia vita
Mi chiuderò nel guscio del silenzio
Forse silenzio di dolore

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[87] From the poem *Amico mio vorrei parlarti...* (My friend, I would like to talk to you), in *La mendicante dei sogni*; my translation.

[88] From the poem *La notte non è finita* (The night is not over) published in the collection *La mendicante dei sogni*; my translation.

[89] From the poem *Sola* (Alone), in *La mendicante dei sogni*; my translation. On the meaning of silence in Romani poetry see also the poems devoted to the Holocaust.

[90] I will not look for love nor life / I will only look for solitude / I will not look for regrets or memories / In this sadness I will drown my life / I will withdraw into the shell of silence / Perhaps silence of sorrow / Perhaps silence of cowardice / The silence will take away my life. From *La mendicante dei sogni*; my translation.

Forse silenzio di viltà
Sarà il silenzio che porterà via la mia vita

She writes about her 'strange' solitude, about her own personal sorrow and desire for annihilation:

MI PORTO UN DEMONE[91]

Mi sto portando un demone sulle spalle
Un demone che decide della mia vita
A suo piacimento
È giorno o notte
Sole o pioggia
Ed io bevo solo sabbia e sale
Il demone sulle mie spalle
Mi porta nel deserto
Dove le mie ossa si polverizzano al sole
Le polveri si spargono sulla mia anima
Prosciugando il mio sangue
Mi sto portando un demone sulle spalle
Che mi allontana dall'azzurro del cielo
E mi porta nell'oscurità dove c'è il nulla
Dove io non esisto più...

The poet's extreme isolation makes her inclined to empathize with those among the Gağe who live in the same situation, with the wretched, the poor, and the exploited. The *conscience malhereuse* of her condition, which writing renders sharper and more lucid, gives her the capacity to unveil the sorrow that lies at the very heart of the human condition.

As in the poems by Nada Braidic analysed above, the Romani woman embodies the very essence of loneliness. She is denied any right to have aspirations and hopes of self-fulfilment. 'Is this the life she wanted?', 'Is this the world she has dreamt about?' – asks the poet. Such crucial questions are probably doomed to remain unanswered, but the fact that they have been formulated has a very important

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[91] I AM CARRYING A DEMON. I am carrying a demon on my shoulders / A demon who decides upon my life / As he likes / Whether daytime or night / Sunny or rainy / And all I drink is sand and salt / The demon on my shoulders / Takes me to the desert / Where my bones crumble under the sun / The ashes are spread over my soul / and dry out all my blood / I am carrying a demon on my

function. They contribute to cast some light on a reality that the general Roma/Gağe opposition simply overshadowed. The unrelenting conflict with the Gağe is not the only affliction affecting the life of the Roma: the poems show that there is a deeper conflict at the very heart of Romani society, which is silenced and repressed through the forceful imposition of male authority, but is not yet resolved.

What is the contribution of female writing to the settlement of this unresolved conflict? Which alternatives does female writing provide to male patterns of identity? As for the role of writing in relation to a common Romani identity, their works are not to be read only in terms of 'opposition' to the authority of the dominant group. Women do not turn their writing to overtly challenge male authority – as this would lead to their expulsion from the group – but to 'negotiate' conflicting needs and social expectations.[92] This is achieved in a number of different ways and has various implications, depending on the group in question. For some women, writing represents a means of negotiation between their inner self and the strict control of the community on their life (see the case of Nada Braidic), and has ultimately led to a positive encounter with the Gağe alterity.[93] For authors such as Luminița Mihai-Cioabă, writing has become a rewarding profession, a successful strategy for 'carving out' an autonomous space within the group.[94] In the case of Paula Schöpf, writing contributed to exacerbate the conflict between her personal identity and the allegiance to the group but, on the other hand, it has also granted her a deeper awareness of the suffering and deprivation characterizing the human

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shoulders / Who takes me away from the blue sky / And leads me into the darkness where there is nothingness / Where I no longer exist. See *La mendicante dei sogni*; my translation.

[92] On the use of writing as a form of negotiation of Romani identity, see Chapter 5.iii.

[93] Nada Braidic's poems, published in 1994, have attracted the attention of some receptive Gağe willing to establish a constructive relationship with the Roma. Nada Braidic now works as a cultural mediator in Udine.

[94] Luminița's work has received international recognition and is highly regarded by contemporary Romanian poets.

condition. Such restructuring of the individual consciousness is particularly relevant to our analysis of Romani literature. The female use of writing seems to confirm the crucial role of the written medium in promoting critical thought and self-awareness – both at an individual and at a group level – as well as validating our general interpretation of Romani literature in terms of 'engagement'.

'*Le parole sono pietre*' (words are stones), Primo Levi wrote. Once they have been given written form, they act as permanent reminder for the generations to come. Such is the Romani Word for the poet Leska Manuś:

Monumento[95]

Ho innalzato un'alta casa, una chiesa
dove l'unica divinità è la Parola Zingara,
non solo per me che l'ho innalzata,
ma per tutti voi, che siete, che verrete
dopo di me in questo mondo più tardi.
Io morirò ma non morirà il mio nome,
sopra questa chiesa esso sarà scritto,
dove unica divinità è la Parola Zingara,
dove sono vive le canzoni zingare e il mio cuore in loro.
Credo: nuovi Zingari verranno alla luce,
molto belli, forti, saggi, istruiti,
bambini e bambine andranno alla chiesa
che ho fatto per loro con il mio senno,
là come me ameranno il mio Dio.
Vivo rimarrò nelle canzoni zingare,
nelle parole, che ho fatto nascere dal mio cuore.

The 'Romani Word' to which the poet refers is, quite significantly, a *written* word. It is a symbolic repository of memory; the warranty, the testimony to the life of the poet. The written medium here is not regarded as a source of oblivion (as feared by Plato), but as the guardian of tradition. Thanks to writing, the 'Romani

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[95] MONUMENT I have built a big house, a church / where the only deity is the Romani Word, / not only for me, the one who built it / but also for all of you, the ones who exist now, and the ones who will come / after me in this world. / I will die but my name will last, / on this church it will remain written, / where the only deity is the Romani Word, / where the *Romani songs* are alive, and my heart lives on within them. / I believe that new Roma will come into the world, / beautiful, strong, wise, educated. / Boys and girls will enter the church / which I have built for them with my wisdom, / where

Word' will not get lost, as it will be preserved from the destructive action of time. This word, however written, does retain a kind of 'epic' quality, as it is thought to be able to symbolically embody and perpetuate the identity of a people. To the author of this poem, the 'Romani Word' is still resounding with the unmistakable melody of a *romani gili*.

(iii) A diversified use of writing

In this chapter I have argued that Romani literature is characterized by a strong commitment to deconstruct the false images and stereotypes against the Romani people. It has also been pointed out that this commitment is not to be interpreted as the exclusive defining feature of this literature. In her critique of the notion of 'transparent engagement' applied to Black writers, Debra Anderson warns us against the widespread tendency to consider their works as aimed merely at illustrating the evils of colonization.[96] When asked about the role of the Romani poet in his community, Rajko Djurić gave this answer:

> aucun poète ne parle lui-même de son rôle; son rôle se constitue socialement, culturellement et ainsi de suite. Il ne peut pas dire, voilà, c'est ça mon rôle. Son rôle ne peut s'expliciter qu'à l'intérieur du temps, dans son époque.[97]

A poetic creation is not just the direct consequence of an act of engagement: if we were to consider the works by Romani authors exclusively in terms of engagement

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they will love my God, as I did. / I will live in the Romani songs, / in the words, which have sprung from my heart. Published in Italian in *Lacio Drom*, XVIII, 3-4 (1982), 3-4; my translation.

[96] D. Anderson, *Decolonizing the Text: Glissantian Readings in Caribbean and African-American Literatures* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995).

[97] 'No poet talks openly about his/her role; his/her role is socially and culturally constructed. S/he cannot say, that is it, that is my role. His/her role cannot but manifest itself with the passing of time, within his/her own epoch. See R. Djurić, *Sans maison sans tombe*, p. xv; my translation.

and protest, we would fail to appreciate the important role played by writing in the permanent construction and assertion of Romani identity. This is why, alongside the deconstructive side of Romani written literature (*pars destruens*), we have examined its constructive function (*pars construens*). We have analysed a number of self-representations elaborated by the Roma, especially those centred on the celebration of the Roma's way of life and the affirmation of the uniqueness and dignity of the Roma. This analysis has revealed a remarkable similarity between these self-images and those forged by the Gağe. However, we have shown that the impression that Romani poetry is mostly the outcome of a process of reflection of the 'fictional Gypsies' cannot be accepted. In reality, this is a case of 'deceptive mirroring' – to quote again Anderson[98] – which risks overshadowing the symbolic shift implied in the 'reiteration' of these images. Romani poets do not merely mirror the clichés of the Gağe. By insisting on images already largely exploited by the Gağe, they reinvent those images *from within*, that is, using the same semiotic medium of the non-Roma and their cultural code. In other words, if the 'signifier' of the aesthetic image remains mostly unchanged, its cultural referent has indeed undergone a drastic displacement: in this case it is the Roma who – more or less aware of the fictional nature of this process – are talking about *themselves*. The reinvention of the Romani image through this 'literary bricolage' implies a high level of textual hybridization and is highly revelatory of the acquisition of an acute awareness of the writing process and its various uses and manifestations. Female poets tend to use writing to express issues that are usually overlooked and subordinated to collective interests. This diversified use of writing in connection with the redefinition of the image of the Roma leads us to reconsider critically the general view on Gypsy identity as a

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[98] D. Anderson, *Decolonizing the Text*, p. 29.

fossilized, monolithic unity. To this purpose, the notion of 'bricolage' is particularly useful to understand the dynamics involved in the formation of Romani identity. As the next chapter aims to show, the reassessment of Romani identity is a continuous process in which writing practices play a crucial role by providing new sites of negotiation and mediation between opposing – and apparently irreconciliable – interpretations of Alterity and cultural diversity.

5 TOWARDS A CROSS-CULTURAL AESTHETIC

LIVING ON[1]
When our bodies are encaged
And our memories are stolen from our minds.
When we weep enchained tears,
Which will flood to the great river of life,
All the cultures of our earth
Will drink a part of us
And through their eyes
We shall again be free.
For when they see a wild horse
Running in the wilderness,
And birds flying south in the winter,
A golden autumn leaf
Slowly wandering from its tree,
Or a sparkling fountain reaching out,
When someone runs to escape
The excited cold breeze,
They shall remember us again,
We can live on forever,
The Gypsy spirit will never truly die.
Hester Hedges

In the initial chapters of this study I have examined a number of representations of 'Gypsies' in European culture and literature. As already pointed out, some of these images circulate in written form, others are found in a series of iconographic representations, as well as musical and theatrical performances. These representations are at the origin of a plethora of misleading beliefs about 'Gypsy' people which were widely disseminated soon after their arrival in Europe and enjoyed great popularity among the host populations.

Allegedly 'authentic' images of 'Gypsies', ranging from the early depictions of a cursed people to the theoretical construction of a criminal race, have endured virtually unchallenged for centuries. After entering the arena of public discourse, they have been used to serve the aims of the dominant groups against the Roma. During this process the depictions of the fictional 'Gypsy' - though mostly spurious and counterfeit - seem to have acquired all the features of a 'natural' truth. The

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[1] From S. Spinelli (ed.), *Baxtalo Drom / Felice Cammino I*, p. 102; published only in the English version.

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[1] From S. Spinelli (ed.), *Baxtalo Drom / Felice Cammino I*, p. 102; published only in the English version.

relevant point here is not the fictional quality of these representations. Broadly speaking, all instances of cultural representations could be defined as 'fictional', because they all derive from a cognitive process of *interpretation* and *construction* of the outward reality.[2] Clearly, this form of cognitive appraisal is never neutral, but rather it is embedded in a particular socio-cultural context, which means that our representations of reality are always refracted through our 'cultural lenses'.[3] In any case, what is at issue here is a rather different question. We have observed that, in the course of the centuries, some (fictional) representations of 'Gypsies' have been imposed as 'official', 'authentic' depictions of the Romani people. How did the fictional representations of the 'Gypsies' achieve this ontological quality? Why are they considered reliable representations of a 'truthful', real identity?

Generally, we may speculate that the official, authoritative appearance with which these representations are presented played a relevant part in establishing them as 'authentic'. As part of the hegemonic discourse, the representations of 'Gypsies' are shaped and disseminated in accordance with the interests of the dominant group. More specifically, it was their written form that made a crucial contribution to grant them authority:

> in official communication, the written form gives words authority. This includes making the message legal [...] and making the message official.[4]

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[2] This is also confirmed by the etymological root of the word *fiction*, which derives from the Latin *fingo, ere*, that is, 'to shape', 'to mould'.

[3] Several authors insist on the fictional character of textual representations – see for example Scholes and Kellogg, Hayden White and W.J.T. Mitchell; more in general on the definition of cultural and ethnic identities as an 'invention', see E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Spread and Origins of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), U. Fabietti *L'identità etnica* (Roma: Carocci, 1998) and F. Remotti, *Contro l'identità* (Bari: Laterza, 1996).

[4] Clark and Ivanič, *The Politics of Writing*, p. 116.

Finally, we should consider that the circulation of these stereotypical representations has been mostly inaccessible for the Roma, who have purposely dwelled at the margins of the Gağe's communication system. The marginal position of the Roma, enforced by social and political exclusion from 'civilized' society, may have further favoured the proliferation of 'fictional Gypsies'. Depicted as 'exotic' creatures of mysterious origins, the 'Gypsies' seemed to embody the very essence of 'foreigness', of radical alterity.

The great popularity of the fictional 'Gypsy' should not lead us to assume an attitude of passive compliance on the Roma's side. To a large extent, Romani people were probably aware of the stereotypes acting against them (if only in terms of the severe repercussions on their life conditions), and in some cases they even succeeded in turning them to their advantage.[5] As Alaina Lemon effectively demonstrates, the stereotypes related to the romantic, Pushkinian 'Gypsies' have permeated the popular views of the Roma, and have been partially absorbed in the self-constructions of the identity of many Romani artists and intellectuals:

> literary stereotypes about Gypsies in Russia cannot be dismissed simply because they are 'inauthentic', because Roma themselves know them and cite them; they have become implicated in many self-representations.[6]

On the whole, however, it seems apparent that negative, denigrating stereotypization of 'Gypsies' has been pursued to such a degree that it has achieved the status of a dominant ideology, pervading the sphere of the political and literary discourse. With the emergence of an authoctonous Romani literature this view has been challenged and criticized.[7] Writing has granted Romani authors the opportunity to give voice to alternative views on their culture. Furthermore, it has provided them

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[5] Cf. for example the so-called 'great trick' mentioned in the first chapter.
[6] Lemon, *Between Two Fires*, p. 51.
[7] This is what we have named the 'agonistic vocation' of Romani literature (see Chapter 4.i).

with new possible forms of affiliation and ethnic identification, some of which will be discussed hereafter.

The relationship between 'Gypsy' and Romani literature could be seen as an important example of this never-ending conflict over meaning and textual interpretation, which reflects the struggle for the control of the Roma's identity. On the one hand, the Gağe's representations of 'Gypsies' played a crucial role in supporting policies of ethnic cleansing and cultural assimilation. On the other hand, the Roma's reformulation of these depictions provides us with some important insights into an ongoing process of ethnogenesis and cultural change.

To a large extent, the emergence of a written production among the Roma could be seen as an act of revolt, a refusal to remain identified with images perceived as extraneous and degrading. In the preface to his collection *The Spirit of the Flame*, the poet Charlie Smith states:

> When I am asked if I am a 'Real Gypsy' my answer is this: I am flesh and blood, I feel pain, I feel joy, I love, I hate, cut me I bleed, I am a real human being living in today's world who happens to be a Gypsy. Not some stereotype that fits misinformed peoples' ideas of what a Gypsy should be. I hope you enjoy my poems.[8]

In many respects, the gulf between the Gağe's views and the Roma's self-depictions seems to be insurmountable. In fact, the Roma/Gağe relationship is frequently represented by the Romani authors themselves in terms of a polar opposition.[9] This is due to the homogenising effect of the stereotype, which makes it possible to objectify and manipulate the Other's diversity by projecting on them a fixed identity. The centuries-old stereotyping process analysed in Chapters 1 and 2 is essentially aimed at forging a monolithic, unalterable image of the 'Gypsy'.

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[8] Charlie Smith, *The Spirit and the Flame* (Manchester: Traveller Education Service, 1990), p. 5.
[9] See Chapters 4.i.i and 4.ii.ii.

Nevertheless, it is essential to point out that the impression of fixity given by authoritative accounts of the 'Gypsy' is itself due to a process of ideological manipulation.[10] In reality, an in-depth analysis of the structure of cultural representations reveals that they are ultimately based on a complex web of interferences and symbolic contaminations. Their constitutive frame is by no means clear-cut and well-defined, but is rather made of discontinuities and intertextual encounters.

One of the main objectives of Romani literature, I have argued, is precisely to dismantle the perverse system of categorization which gave rise to the 'Gypsy' image. Alongside this deconstructive refutation of the stereotype, however, the analysis of the works by Romani authors shows also a tendency to reproduce and 're-enact' precisely some of the images forged by the Gağe. In the course of this chapter I will investigate the multiple factors at the root of this contradictory phenomenon. In particular, I shall look at issues of intertextuality and textual hybridization, which will uphold our analysis of the features of Romani identity and its current redefinition through the use of the written medium. I will address especially the 'liminal condition' of Romani authors – primarily of Romani women writers – and their use of literature as a means of negotiation of identity. This dynamic, interactive use of writing should be regarded with the utmost attention as it helps to undermine the deeply rooted stereotype of the 'Gypsies' as a people without writing and no sense of identity and might pave the way for a more constructive relationship between Roma and majority society.

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[10] Post-structuralist and post-colonial theories have laid bare and criticized the crude binarism which the cross-cultural discourse of the West has imposed on its 'others' by deconstructing and deauthorizing such misleading stereotypes.

(i) The difference within: Romani identity and the need for a representational turn

Earlier in this thesis I have argued that the literary production by Romani authors substantially challenges the Gağe's hegemonic representations of the 'Gypsy'. But what is the link between literature and the identity of the Roma as an 'ethnic minority'?[11] What is the main contribution of writing (a code traditionally monopolized by the non-'Gypsies') to the expression and the re-shaping of Romani identity?

Recent studies of post-colonial and migrant writing have shown that, when identity is denied and displaced, literature can play a fundamental role in devising new ways of expression of the voice of the oppressed and the 'subaltern'.[12] In a sense, every form of identity is based on a process of symbolic 'displacement', due to the structure of the act of signification and the features of cultural practices. According to the interactionist approach, which will be analysed below, the only way in which one's identity may be defined and expressed is in relation to the identities of the others. To illustrate this process, Bhabha resorts to the trope of translation as defined by Benjamin:

> Meaning is constructed across the bar of difference and separation between the signifier and the signified. [...] In order to objectify cultural meaning there always has to be a process of alienation and of secondariness *in relation to itself.* In that sense there is no 'in itself' and 'for itself' within cultures because they are always subject to intrinsic forms of translation. [...] What this really means is that cultures are only

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[11] On the distiction between 'ethnic cultures' and 'minorities' see A. JanMohammed and D. Lloyd, *The Nature and Content of Minority Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) and D. Lloyd, 'Ethnic Cultures, Minority Discourse and the State'in F. Barker, P. Hulme, and M. Iversen (eds.), *Colonial Discourse/Postcolonial Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), pp. 221-238. For a critique of the notion of 'minority' see A. Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identity* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 186-190.

[12] See G. C. Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in P. Williams and L. Chrisman (eds.), *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), pp. 66-111.

> constructed in relation to that otherness internal to their own symbol-forming activity which makes them decentred structures.[13]

In a similar fashion, Derrida refers to a perpetual displacement within linguistic meaning, which entails an indefinite referrral of signifier to signifier (*différance*).[14] Moreover, it is important to note that the signifying practices through which identity is constructed are always embedded in specific relations of power whereby only the dominant group is authorized to 'name' and (ethnocentrically) define the Other. From this point of view, the act of affirmation of the dominant identity usually coincides with the silencing of the Other's self-definition and its replacement with the hegemonic view.[15] This explains why oppressed minorities resort to literature as a sort of 'place to live',[16] that is, the symbolic repository of what is at risk of being erased and suppressed in the process of their forced integration into the dominant society. In such cases, writing equates to a performative act of affirmation of the self against the politically hegemonic identity. Writing allows the author to find a literary 'niche' where s/he can 'write' her/his self, and this is accomplished not merely in oppositional, binary terms – which would lead to a form of reversed stereotyping. This literary interstice is in fact a *liminal* space which mirrors the complex and changing features of her/his identity in a situation of cultural contact.[17] Not only does writing *reflect* the multifaceted aspects of identity in a multicultural

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[13] From 'The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha', in J. Rutherford (ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (Lawrence & Wishart: London, 1990), pp. 207-221 (p. 210).

[14] See in particular Derrida's works *'Speech and Phenomena' and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. by D. B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973); *Writing and Difference*, trans. by A. Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) and *Of Grammatology*, trans. by G. C. Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

[15] See in this regard Said's discussion of the Western politics of representation of the Orient in his *Orientalism*.

[16] R. King, J. Connell and P. White (eds.), *Writing Across Worlds: Literature and Migration* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. xv.

[17] The concept of liminality was first formulated by the ethnographer Arnold van Gennep in relation to the study of the ritual. It generally refers to a special state during which the person undergoing a ritual is separated from the rest of the society, a condition marked by the adoption of a series of practices which tend to be in sharp contrast with the patterns of conventional behaviour. See A. Van

context; it also helps *shape* and *recode* this identity, as well as destabilizing hegemonic patterns of representation of the 'Other' as a fixed, essentialized category.

The key aspect of 'migrant' and 'diasporic' identities is their status of 'in-betweenness', their being situated at the symbolic intersection between different linguistic and cultural 'frontiers'.[18] This process of intermingling of identities and cultures is widely regarded as potentially innovative.[19] While the mechanism of stereotype adopted by the dominant group isolates and locks diversity in a rigid oppositional structure, hybridization highlights new spaces of negotiation of identity previously unexpressed – what Bhabha defines as the 'Third space'.[20] It is in the light of the creative intercrossing of different languages and semiotic systems that I shall examine the written production by Romani authors and their contribution to the expression of a new Romani identity. Such discussion of the hybrid nature of Romani literature, however, would be inevitably incomplete without considering the current debate on identity and its complex ramifications. In this section I shall look in particular at the recent anthropological reformulation of identity in order to illustrate the innovative potential of Romani literature as a literary hybrid.

As anthropologists maintain, a crucial device for the formation of identity in its widest acception - embracing social, cultural and personal identity – consists of defining the Self *interactively* and *contrastively*, that is, through a never-ending, dynamic process of confrontation/identification/opposition to the Other. The foundation of social life in its totality has to be found in a process of 'externalization'

Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1960).

[18] On the anthropological use of the concept of 'frontier' see J. W. Cole and E. Wolf, *La frontiera nascosta* (Rome: La Nuova Italia Scientifica, 1994), E. Wolf, *L'Europa e i popoli senza storia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1990), U. Fabietti, *L'identità etnica* (Roma: Carocci, 2002), pp. 104-115.

[19] See H. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, A. Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identity* (London: Routledge, 1996), J. Clifford, 'Diasporas', *Cultural Anthropology*, 9 (1994), 302-338.

[20] See H. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, pp. 36-39.

and interaction with other individuals that is the necessary precondition for a proper self-awareness to be effectively reached. Without the presence of an outward reality onto which to project and objectify ourselves (as distinct from other entities), no form of reflexive perception of one's identity is likely to be reached. In other words, awareness of others is a crucial aspect of the acquisition of the awareness of the self. This interactive aspect of identity also emerges from the etymology of the word. Identity is a term derived from the Greek τὸ αυτὸ, from which came the Latin form *identitas*, that is, *sameness*. The principle of sameness entails that of differentiation from an Alterity: to be *identical to ourselves* means being unique, being somehow *distinguishable from the others*.[21] According to Aristotle's 'principle of non-contradiction', 'the same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject in the same respect' and 'no one can at the same time believe the same thing to be and not to be'.[22] In other words, to be the same as ourselves implies to be completely different from the others. As already stated, this interactive principle is thought to be the foundation of the identity of individuals. As shown by the exponents of symbolic interactionism,[23]

> 'Selves can only exist in definite relationships to other selves';
>
> 'the self (as that which can be an object to itself) is essentially a social structure, and it arises in social experience'.[24]

The same principle is also supposed to lie at the roots of every society and ethnic group:

> Cultures are more than just empirically comparable: They are intrinsecally comparative... like languages, cultures are fundamentally

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[21] In this regard see the Saussurian concept of 'écart différentiel'.

[22] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 4.3, $1005^{b}18$-24 (ed. and trans. by W. D. Ross, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), p. 262).

[23] Symbolic interactionist tradition has its main exponents in Charles H. Cooley, G. H. Mead and more recently in Erving Goffman.

[24] George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1967), p. 140.

> besides themselves: inside out as well as outside in. Analytically, cultures are constituted contrastively.[25]

The perception of sameness brings with it the definition of what should be included among the constituents of identity, that is, the attributes regarded as representative of a particular identity. These constituents (whose nature and articulation are still controversial among the theorists) are conceived as *distinctive* features. Again, what emerges from the dynamic formation of identity is the perception of a *discontinuity* which lies at the core of cultural and social heterogeneity. In Levi-Strauss' structuralist view, culture has been defined as a 'fragment of humanity which [...] presents significant discontinuities in relation to the rest of humanity' (p.288). This approach emphazises the creative function of *difference* conceived not as absolute difference, but as *écart différentiel* creating additional meaning.[26]

An interactive conception of culture leads us necessarily to take into consideration the *social context* where the interactions take place, as well as the power relations involved. The ways in which differences among groups are perceived, in fact, are not pre-established and predictable, but are likely to vary considerably, depending on political and economic factors. Cultural and ethnic differences are socially constructed, they do not refer to any tangible, real quality but are rather the outcome of a continuous process of cultural invention. Besides, they can be attributed to the other groups in order to prevent (or favour) their access to power and economic resources. From this point of view, every form of identity is contemporaneously a process of self-ascription and hetero-ascription. As shown by Francis Affergan, besides the gaze cast by the Self upon the Other, we should take into consideration the gaze that the Other

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[25] Boon, *Other Tribes, Other Scribes*, pp. 230-231.

[26] As we will see, the emphasis on cultural difference should always be associated with the analysis of the continuities between cultures (see Section 5.v).

projects onto the observer.[27] The others can never be reduced to passive bearers of an ascribed identity and they always retain their status of subject. Affergan criticizes a *merely* oppositional approach to Otherness, which in his view leads to the 'decadence' and 'degradation' of Alterity to the dimension of pure 'difference'. To define ourselves through an Alterity does not necessarily imply its confinement to the second pole of a bynary opposition. If we choose to define the Other in terms of 'deficiencies', 'lacunae' and 'deviations', postulating our culture as the ideal term of the comparison, as the 'norm', we risk overlooking a very crucial aspect of the question: every form of 'heterology' (discourse on the Other) presupposes another heterology in return: after all, we are Others to other cultures.[28]

The ethnic camouflage of the 'Gypsies' is a typical case in which the emic, internal perspective has been completely eclipsed by the hetero-definitions reflecting the epistemological paradigm of the dominant group. A notorious example of this manipulation is represented by the numerous attempts to reconstruct the 'origins' of this mysterious people. There was a time when Western scholars thought they had found the decisive key to solve the 'Gypsy' case': their language. Drawing on scholars who established a linguistic affiliation between *romanes* and Indic languages, nineteenth-century Gypsiologists turned this cognation into a biological link and claimed the Indian origin of the 'Gypsies'. At that time, similarities among populations, regardless of their geographical dislocation, were assumed as evidence of a common origin. The lexical heterogeneity detected in *romanes* was consequently interpreted as a reliable map of the routes covered by the 'Gypsies' on

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[27] See F. Affergan, *Esotismo e alterità: Saggio sui fondamenti di una critica dell'antropologia* (Milan: Mursia, 1991).

[28] See M. de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986) and F. Remotti (ed.) *Le antropologie degli altri*.

their journey towards the West and the 'Gypsies' were regarded as the descendants of a unitarian, 'pure' group which once existed in India.

The discovery of the close affinity between Romani and Indian languages paved the way for a long debate over the exodus of the 'Gypsies' and their 'real' ethnic origins. Only those who talked *romanes* were then regarded as 'true' 'Gypsies'; the others were considered not 'authentic'. The search for the 'true' Gypsies, now regarded as the most sterile intellectual dispute in the history of Gypsies studies,[29] is part of a broader strategy aimed at 'explaining' and classifying the diversity of the 'Gypsies'. The claims of the Gypsiologists, who based their theories on linguistic grounds, as well as more recent claims supported by findings in the field of physical anthropology and population genetics, rely on the assumption that the 'Gypsies' once were a single group speaking a single language who subsequently migrated from their country of origin.[30]

Speculation about the 'diaspora' of the 'Gypsies' and their 'real' origins is directly related to the traditional model of ethnicity whose historical and political frame of reference is the nation-state. According to this model, it is possible to identify an ideal type of ethnic community whose fundamental features are:

- a collective proper name
- a myth of common ancestry
- shared historical memories
- one or more differentiating elements of common culture
- an association with a specific 'homeland'
- a sense of solidarity for significant sectors of the population.[31]

In the eyes of European sedentarized society cultural identity is inextricably

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[29] Cf. L. Piasere (ed.), *Comunità Girovaghe, Comunità Zingare*, p. 15.

[30] In reality there is no intrinsic relation linking language and race, and the fact that people speak cognate languages does not demonstrate any necessary connection between them. As anthropological investigation has clearly revealed, cultural phenomena are transmitted through the socialization process, rather than biological descent.

[31] A. Smith, *National Identity* (Oxford: Penguin, 1991), p. 21.

linked with a well-defined territorial unity: the nation. National identity is perceived as a sort of 'inherent attribute of humanity' itself, as Gellner pointed out, and there seems to be a tacit belief in an inextricable bond linking up peoples, nations and languages:

> A man without a nation defies the recognized categories and provokes revulsion. [...] a man must have a nationality as he must have a nose and two ears; a deficiency in any of these particulars is not inconceivable and does from time to time occur, but only as a result of some disaster, and it is itself a disaster of a kind.[32]

Ethnic identity is automatically associated with the idea of a homeland (real or mythical)[33] and is generally regarded as a fundamental, primary factor of self-identification. Advocates of what have been defined 'primordialist' or 'objectivist' theories of ethnicity consider the *ethnos*[34] as having a biological foundation, and define it as 'a group of people, speaking one and the same language and admitting common origin, characterized by a set of customs and a life style, which are preserved and sanctified by tradition, which distinguishes it from others of the same kind'.[35] These notions are indicative of a generalized tendency to establish neat boundaries between people, to divide human groups into discrete entities with stable 'roots' and homogeneous identities. They also entail a positive conception of territorial stability against physical mobility which forms the basis of what McVeigh has defined the ideology of 'sedentarism'.[36] The hostile attitude displayed by the Gağe is largely due to the Roma's alternative way of living and perceiving their

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[32] E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p. 6.
[33] According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* 'ethnic' is what pertains to 'a race or nation'.
[34] Term derived fom the ancient Greek and meaning 'people', 'number of people living together', 'tribe'.
[35] S.M.Shirokogorov, cited in A. Barnard and Jonathan Spencer (eds), *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 191.
[36] R. McVeigh, 'Theorizing sedentarism: the roots of anti-nomadism', in T. Acton and G. Mundy (eds.), *Romani Culture and Gypsy Identity* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 1999), pp. 7-25.

identity. Their sense of group belonging is not based on criteria of territoriality or fixed abode: for them, 'ethnic links through descent and kinship take priority over political, geographical nationality, and therefore birth place and long term location'.[37] This lack of conformity with the dominant patterns of settlement and social organization of the settled population gave rise to the perception of the 'Gypsies' as a public nuisance or even a threat to the political unity of the host countries.[38] I suggest that we look at the whole issue from another – diametrically opposite – perspective. The perception of Romani people as 'deviants' and 'social misfits' can be ascribed to the substantial incapacity of an obsolete model of ethnicity to account for their persistence as an ethnic group. It is precisely the insistence on such ethnocentric patterns that supported the centuries-old belief in the anomaly of the 'Gypsies' and was used as a pretext to deny their cultural diversity and assimilate them into the dominant culture. In reality, the conception of nomadism in terms of 'anomaly' is utterly misleading. As Okely pointed out, the sedentary pattern of settlement emerged only in a late phase of human history:

> The home and hearth were mobile in some early histories. [...] The fixity of place is only real for some peoples and perhaps an artificial remnant of colonialism where subject peoples were restricted in movement, and where nomads, migrants and itinerants have been subject to draconian control.[39]

The application of Western models of ethnicity to Romani identity has also proved highly unsatisfactory and reveals the inadequacy of the objectivist views on identity, which were first criticized by the anthropologist Friedrich Barth. Barth's introduction to the collection *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* is unanimously

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[37] J. Okely, 'Rootlessness against spatial fixing', in R. Bendix and H. Roodenburg (eds.), *Managing Ethnicity: Perspectives from folklore studies, history and anthropology* (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 2000), pp. 13-39 (p. 26).

[38] See Chapter 1.iv.

[39] J. Okely, 'Rootlessness against spatial fixing', pp. 17; 22.

regarded as a seminal 'anthropological turn' from this objectivist approach towards a 'constructivist' conceptualization of ethnicity. Instead of studying ethnic groups as characterized by 'fixed' identities, he shifted the attention to processes of self and hetero-ascription, emphasizing the situational, relativistic features of identity. What is important, in Barth's view, is not the conception of ethnic groups as 'cultural units', but rather the dynamic and negotiable nature of their boundaries.

Current approaches to the study of ethnicity tend to underline its contrastive, dynamic side, paying particular attention to situations of cultural contact where ethnicity can be studied not as an abstract theorization, but as a process taking place in the arena of socio-ethnical diversity.[40] Human cultures should not be seen as separate 'islands' refractory to any kind of 'contamination' with the outward world, but as highly dynamic entities which rely mostly on *interaction* and cultural interchange for their actual survival. Contemporary cultural theory also supports a pluralistic, dynamic view of culture as 'an assemblage of imaginings and meanings that [...] is always transitory, open and unstable'.[41] By the same token, scholars concerned with Romani studies have rejected any essentialist definition of Romani identity, emphasizing its interactive, 'relational' basis.[42] According to them, instead of being associated with some fixed attributes (whether related to 'race', shared

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[40] For an overview of the main approaches to the study of ethnicity see V. Maher, *Questioni di etnicità* (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1994), H. Vermeulen and C. Govers (eds.), *The Anthropology of Ethnicity:Beyond 'Ethnic groups and boundaries'* (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1994), T. H. Eriksen, 'The epistemological status of the concept of ethnicity', Conference paper, Amsterdam ('The Anthropology of Ethnicity'), December 1993. Published in Anthropological Notebooks (Ljubljana, Slovenia), available on-line (http://folk.uio.no/geirthe/Status_of_ethnicity.html); R. Cohen, 'Ethnicity: Problem and Focus in Anthropology', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 7 (1978), 379-403; P. Poutignac and J. Streiff-Fenart, *Teorie dell'etnicità* (Milan: Mursia, 2000); S. Fenton, *Ethnicity* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2003). See also U. Fabietti, *L'identità etnica*; F. Remotti, *Contro l'identità*.

[41] J. Lewis, *Cultural Studies: The Basics* (London: Sage, 2002), p. 13. See also C. Barker, *Cultural Studies* (London: Sage, 2001).

[42] See in particular L. Piasere, *Popoli delle discariche* (Rome: CISU, 1991), M. Stewart, *The Time of the Gypsies* (Boulder: Westview, 1997) and J. Okely, *The Traveller-Gypsies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

origins or nationality), Romani identity should be studied in its pragmatic unfolding in the social context. It is mainly in the oppositional relation with the Gağe that the Roma define themselves and their position in the sedentary society. Within their society, territorial dispersion and peripatetic practices are essential socio-economic strategies that entail constant interchange with the outside and require remarkable flexibility on its inside. This continuous process of negotiation with the host societies – rather than mere isolation – represents the winning strategy that explains their persistence as an ethnic group. As Mayall wrote (p. 67), 'a less resilient culture and less adaptable economy would have crumbled', instead, their flexibility did not result in collapse and incorporation, but rather consolidation and adaptation. Despite enormous pressure to assimilate, the Roma have succeeded in carving out their own cultural 'space' through a creative, dynamic process of selection and transformation. Some authors resort to the notion of 'bricolage' in order to represent this creative strategy. How does a *bricoleur* operate? According to Lévi-Strauss, the *bricoleur* makes use of a pre-existent set of tools and he is able to employ them in a creative and innovative manner.[43] In her study of British Travellers, Judith Okely refers to the notion of 'bricolage' to illustrate the relation between 'Gypsy' and Gorgio (non-'Gypsy') culture:

> The Gypsies may indeed incorporate symbols, rites and myths from the larger society, but there is a systematic, not random, selection and rejection. Some aspects may be transformed or given an inverted meaning. The Gypsies, and possibly other oppressed groups, can be seen as *bricoleurs*, picking up some things, rejecting others.[44]

The idea of a creative recombination of pre-existing elements may also be applied to the process of literary creation. In Lefevere's view, literature could be considered

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[43] See C. Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage* (Paris: Plon, 1962).
[44] J. Okely, *The Traveller-Gypsies*, p. 77.

as a 'poetics', a 'collection of devices' '[whose] boundaries transcend languages, and ethnic and political entities'.[45] The notion of literature as a 'collection of devices', far from implying a sort of 'technical reductionism', highlights a crucial feature of the literary creation, and of Romani written works in particular. It enables us to look at Romani literature not as a marginal reality, but as a dynamic phenomenon based on strategies of cross-cultural textual interplay. However, for the purpose of my analysis this approach reveals some evident limitations. Literary images and representations cannot simply be considered as 'tools' and inert 'objects' but, in so far as they are conveyed by *language*, they are embedded in a specific representational system. From this point of view, we cannot reduce them to an assemblage of devices whose semiotic status is neutral and self-explanatory. These images 'signify', they bear a deep symbolic denotation *in addition to* their referential connotation.[46] Symbols and images are 'encoded' clusters of meaning that can be interpreted only in the wider social and political context and in connection with the specific power relations at work in that context. In the case of the Roma, the hybrid reassembling and mirroring of literary tropes and techniques derived from the Gağe are thus to be read as critical reinterpretations of pre-existing ideologies formulated by the dominant society. H. Bhabha illustrates this point very well when he affirms that 'strategies of hybridisation reveal an estranging movement in the "authoritative", even authoritarian inscription of the cultural sign'.[47]

The contestative, innovative potential of textual and cultural hybridity will be the main object of the next section. As seen in Chapter 4, dialogicity and hybridity are

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[45] A. Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 30.

[46] See Roland Barthes's analysis of the linguistic message (cf. 'The Rhetoric of the Image', in *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1984), pp. 32-51).

[47] Cf. Bhabha's article 'Culture's in between', in D. Bennett (ed.), *Multicultural States: Rethinking Difference and Identity* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 29-36 (p. 34).

indeed central aspects of the literary production of the Roma. In the following pages I will discuss in detail these crucial features in the light of a possible reassessment of Romani identity and an innovative reformulation of the Roma/Gağe relationship.

(ii) Romany literature as a 'literary hybrid'

As already stated in Chapter 4, the literary production of the Roma can be fruitfully analized in the light of its multiple interconnections with the fictional representations circulating within the dominant society. The next section is devoted to the analysis of the creative potential of such interconnections and reciprocal influences. My aim is to show that in their writings Romani authors do not merely mirror or oppose the hetero-ascribed representations devised by the Gağe, but they reinterpret them creatively and succeed in finding their autonomous, unmistakable voice. I will focus in particular on the production of Italian Roma and its links with the Italian literary tradition. As will be shown, these authors make a distinct effort to 'translate' Romani themes and images into the linguistic and literary code of the Gağe. The result is a text embodying a duplicity of gazes, which is often reflected by the double linguistic format of the texts. As the Romni Nada Braidic confirmed to me in a recent interview, the destiny of Romani poets is to be bilingual and bicultural. This admission, which seems tinged with a shade of fatalism, is indeed of great importance. It amounts to the recognition of the 'interstitial' nature of their inspiration, suspended between the traditional topics characterizing Romani culture and *Weltanschauung* and the Western European tradition. It is important to emphasize here that the interference between these literary traditions does not entail automatically a process of hierarchical incorporation (stemmed from the binarism

orality/writing), nor an unchallenged symbolic assimilation. Cultural meanings do not originate from mere incorporation and/or rejection of representations and symbols, but are a matter of continuous negotiation and creative hybridization.[48] Symbolic meaning and images are characterized by a highly dynamic nature; their contours are fluid and unstructured, rather than transparent and sharply defined. This indefiniteness and 'imperspicuity' (in Geertz' terms, we could define it as 'thickness') derives primarily from the symbolic nature of culture itself, which deeply permeates its literary manifestation,[49] and it is maximized through the irreducible polysemy of the poetic text. As we will see, Romani authors, without being anchored in any specific literary tradition, rely on different sources (both literary and non-literary) and various uses of writing which intermingle and overlap in a dynamic fashion.

In the case of Romani literature, hybridization operates at different levels. The use of the very term 'hybrid' in this context needs to be clarified and tailored to the case of Romani literature. This term was originally employed to name the cross-breeding of two different species. It is currently used in postcolonial theory in relation to the process of resistance and contestation whereby hybrid, 'diasporic' identities challenge and subvert the assimilative, essentialist dominant narratives. In this study my understanding of the term is mostly related to cases of code mixing and textual hybridity, and I consider it as closely connected to the notion of *bricolage*, in so far as this entails the blending of heterogeneous objects into new, 'mixed' entities. I will also refer to Bakhtin's notion of 'intentional hybridity' to signify the dialogic

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[48] See Bhabha, 'Culture's in-Between', pp. 29-36.

[49] "Because the meaning of every symbol constitutes a *class*, it would seem that without language there could be no symbolism – except perhaps a very rudimentary sense of cognized interrelationships – and certainly no culture. Words are themselves a class of symbols, concretely realized by means of oral or written manipulations" (Ingold, 1994: 370).

mixing of different literary forms detected in a number of works by Roma. Bakhtin defines 'organic' hybridization as 'one of the most important modes in the historical life and evolution of all languages'.[50] Organic hybridity, which is unconscious and unintentional, is the 'mixing of various "languages" co-existing within the boundaries of a single dialect, a single national language, a single branch' (pp. 358-9). Bakhtin distinguishes this form of hybridity from the 'conscious', 'intentional' hybridization by which 'two points of view are not mixed, but set against each other dialogically' (p. 360). As we shall see, this latter notion will prove extremely useful to the textual analysis presented in this section.

In Chapter 3 I have already analysed the linguistic heterogeneity of Romani literature, as well as its implications in terms of redearship. Here, I will dwell on other instances of hybridization, such as the interference between different semiotic systems – the oral and the written – which marks out Romani written literature from its very first appearance (at least in Western Europe). As seen in Chapter 3, the initial encounter of Romani (oral) tradition with writing took place under the auspices of the Gağe. In the beginning, it was the Gağe that gave impulse to the transcriptions of autobiographical and fictional narratives. The influence of orality on these texts is so powerful that they may be considered in-between the oral and the written code. Some texts – especially those belonging to the early stages of Romani literature – are specifically conceived to be set to music. In addition to this 'transparent' form of hybridization, we should notice that most of the texts presented in this study display another, more subtle influence of the oral mode of expression: it is what we called the 'agonistic' vocation of Romani literature. The presence of orality in this production is to be found in the attitude and 'forma mentis' of its

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[50] Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 358.

authors, engaged in a sort of 'textual performance' aimed at challenging misleading stereotypes against their people. On a more specific level, the influence of orality manifests itself in the dialogic structure of the poems, characterized by direct forms of address, rhetorical questions, widespread use of indexical terms and frequent occurrence of hyperbolic language,[51] which has been recognized as a typical feature of Romani oral tradition.[52] Finally, we observe the purposeful insertion of ordinary, colloquial language into the texts, which amounts to a critical opposition to the hegemonic hierarchy of literary genres and styles, a sort of 'counter-colonization' against the poetic register.

In the two poems presented below, the use of the oral mode fulfils a number of different textual functions. First of all, it conveys a remarkable degree of verbal violence, which reproduces effectively the dramatic conditions experienced by the Roma, as well as acting as a denunciation against the impossibility of establishing a constructive dialogue with mainstream society. From this point of view these texts, conceived polemically as monologues in which the authors express their impotence and frustration, seem to re-enact the controversial features of the Roma/Gağe relationship. Despite the polemic emphasis on the lack of communication and the substantial segregation of the Roma from the majority society, it is important not to overlook the dialogic pattern underlying the text, within which the reader may easily identify two conflictual points of view.

The poem *Senza speranza* by Mansueto Levacovich is a meaningful example of this dialogizing pattern, which corresponds to Bakhtin's notion of 'intentional'

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[51] Cf. in particular the poems by M. Levacovich and P. Schöpf, analysed in Chapter 4.

[52] Cf. J. Dick-Zatta, 'The Metonymic Pole of Language and the Referential Function in Rom Sloveni narration', in *Lacio Drom*, 3-4 (1985), pp. 2-30.

hybridization:

'Gagio, e tu gagi;
voi che seguite il nostro cammino
predicando amore e pace,
ma non sapete cosa sono.
Noi Rom siamo umiliati e perseguitati,
bastonati, scacciati, stanchi e affamati.
Vi supplichiamo: fermatevi.
Le sofferenze sono tante e tante...

No zingaro, zingari.
Noi siamo il vostro destino.
I nostri avi hanno perseguitato i vostri avi,
noi perseguitiamo voi'.[53]

The dialogical structure of the poem enables the author to find a sort of 'multiple' voice, whose mixed ethnic connotations are emphasized by the use of Romani words (see the recurrence of the terms *gagio* and *gagi*) within the Italian text. The text by G. D. Kwiek presented below is another good example of internal dialogization which successfully re-enacts the conflictual nature of the Roma/Gağe relationship. While the re-enactment of this conflict does not constitute in itself any particular change in the dominant representational pattern of the 'Gypsy', it is the viewpoint from which the conflict is presented that is radically different. Here, it is the Rom who gives voice to the stereotypes against the Roma, and her voice is filled with satirical and polemical vehemence. The result is a powerful critique of the dominant view on Romani identity.

'Hello, I'm the common Rom.
When us Rom are organized and live in one area, that place is a *lageri*.

Hello, I'm the common Rom.
Some fool told me to reveal to *gadjé* that I'm a Rom, and stand up –.
(I don't think this guy was a Rom).

Hello, I'm the common Rom.
What do you mean, we are trash, the lowest of the low?
Then we probably deserve the way *gadjé* treat us.

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[53] Extracted from the poem *Senza speranza* (without hope) quoted in Section 4.i.i.

...Hello, I'm the common Rom.
Education? Are you joking?
We can't change – it's in our blood.
We will always be stupid Rom.

Hello, I'm the common Rom.
What do you mean, 'listen to the *magerdo gadjo*'?
Get out of my face!'[54]

Another important form of hybridization is to be found in the use of images and representations which resemble closely the representations of the Gağe. The theme of nomadism in particular, although profoundly revisited by Romani poets and presented as the result of exclusion and social marginalization,[55] remains the main 'site' of hybridization and intertextuality to be found in the body of Romani literature. The images of the Roma as 'free spirits' and 'sons of the wind', for example, are highly evocative of the popular representations of the 'Gypsy' as the embodiment of free will and unrestricted volition.[56]

The following texts, which epitomize this 'rarefied' version of nomadism, are significantly replete with figures and metaphoric expressions, and display a rhetoric register of language – large use of anaphoric repetition, alliteration, exclamation and rhetorical questions – which reinforces its conventional character.

..Imè ciavò di bràvàl,
dat di bar drom...
Bar ciar mrù dommà a lià,
dox di grast tsoralè
ta sukuàr gilipè di ciliklè
mri khàn a sunjè.
Tarnè ruk a ningiriè
mrù drom barò,
ta panì ta cikkà
ta thèm ta khàm
ta dùt ta tatipè
andrè li dives mirè;
ni 'ngiràt sinè mrù khèr,
sunasinèm barò!

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[54] From the poem I AM THE COMMON ROM by Gregory Dufunia Kwiek, published in *The Roads of the Roma*, p. 106.
[55] See Section 4.i.ii.
[56] In this regard, see Lemon's discussion of Pushkin's *The Gypsies* in *Between Two Fires*, pp. 35-46.

...Io figlio del vento,
padre di lungo cammino...
Vaste distese erbose la mia schiena ha toccato,
fiati di poderosi cavalli
e dolci cinguettii di uccelli
le mie orecchie hanno udito.
Verdi alberi hanno guidato
il mio interminabile cammino,
e acque e terre
e cieli e sole
e luce e calore
nei miei giorni vissuti;
una tenda era il mio nido,
mi sentivo libero![57]

...Som puró te kinó
ma nastí čáva.
Le Sínti čéna, mónsi
te merén,
sóske o drom si léngro trúpo.

Pro drom jamén vássa pru vélto,
pasál da le dromá jamén ğivássa,
pro búto da je drom léla amén
o meribén.

...Gli Zingari si fermano solo
per morire,
perché la strada è la loro vita.

Sulla strada veniamo al mondo,
lungo le strade viviamo,
in fondo ad una strada ci prende
la morte.[58]

In these poems the reference to a nomadic way of life could be considered essentially a textual strategy, a fictive device.[59] This aestheticization of nomadism

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[57] I, son of the wind / Father of the long walk... / The vast plains of grass my back has touched, / the breath of powerful horses / and the sweet song of birds / my ears have heard. / Green trees have guided / My never ending walk, / and waters and lands / and skies and sun / and light and heat / the days I've lived; / a tent was my home: / I felt free! From the poem *Son of the wind* by S. Spinelli (see Section 4.ii.ii).

[58] The Gypsies stop only / to die, / because the road is their life. / On the road we are born, / On the road we live, / At the end of a road death / Will catch us. From the poem *Destino* by Pučo (see Section 4.ii.i).

[59] This is confirmed by the fact that very few of them are actually leading a nomadic way of life. On the fictional use of nomadism see also the Gağe's post-modern fascination with the 'nomad' and the great popularity enjoyed by travel writing.

does not undermine the harsh reality experienced by the Roma kept on the move by restricting policies enforced by the dominant society. In fact, these conflicting representations co-exist with one another and are to be considered in the light of the theoretical frame illustrated earlier in this thesis, according to which writing practices are always to be linked up with the social context in which they emerge. It is in relation to their specific context of situation that we have to look at the multiple sources and legacies detected in Romani literature. The different circumstances and specific purposes for which they are formulated explain why some texts explicitly challenge the literary paradigm of the Gağe, others reproduce it (more or less faithfully), while yet others aim to express the tradition and values of the Romani people, regardless of any extrinsic legacy and convention.

As far as the specific influence of Gağe's written tradition on Romani literature is concerned, I shall refer in particular to poetic works published in Italy. More specifically, I intend to discuss the poems by Santino Spinelli, maybe the most widely-known among the Italian Romani authors mentioned in this thesis. Such authors mainly belong to groups of Roma and Sinti, whose presence in Italy dates back from the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries (as seen in the case of the Sinti and the Slovenian-Croatian Roma) or even before that period (as in the case of the Roma from the Abruzzi, whose arrival in Italy probably dates from the fifteenth century). The educational attainment of these authors is very high. Most of them have attended Italian schools for a number of years well above the average and have achieved a remarkable command of the Italian language.[60] For

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[60] For instance, the Slovenian-Croatian Romni Nada Braidic obtained the leaving certificate at the end of three years of secondary education (*licenza media*), Paula Schöpf attended (without completing it) secondary school for the training of primary teachers (*scuola magistrale*), and Spinelli graduated in Foreign Languages and Literatures from the University of Bologna.

them, the writing process takes place primarily in Italian and is characterized by heavily borrowing from the Italian literary tradition. Nevertheless, such conspicuous reference to the works of Italian Gağe authors does not necessarily result in the incorporation and assimilation of the 'minor' tradition into the hegemonic one. The literary tradition of the Gağe is only one of the multiple sources of inspiration of Romani authors, who draw widely from their oral traditions and also from other Romani poets.[61] With regard to the formal features of the texts, we notice some – limited – use of technical and poetic conventions of various origin. Some authors make use of specific metres and rhyming patterns such as the sonnet (Spinelli). In general, the free verse is the most frequent choice, together with the large use of a narrative metre. In a number of poems, especially those concerned with expressions of grief and violence (exemplary in this regard are the poems devoted to the Holocaust), we notice an 'expressionistic' use of the language, and some compositions could be read as instances of a surrealist *écriture automatique*.[62] A highly symbolic use of the language is also frequent, especially in those texts where the poets enact a sort of 'dialogue' with Nature and its elements.[63]

Some commentators have emphasized a direct indebtedness of Romani literature to European authors.[64] However, Italian Romani authors rarely acknowledge the influence of specific Gağe authors and literary currents on their works. In fact, their aim is not to be recognized as exponents of a particular literary current. They seem more interested in the general 'aura' of literariness that the use of poetic language confers to their texts. In other words, they place the emphasis on the status –

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[61] See the influential works by Papusza, who remains a constant point of reference for Romani authors, and, more specifically, some cases of cross-reference among the poets – the most remarkable being that of Rasim Sejdić and his son Aladjn.

[62] Cf. Chapter 4.i.iii.

[63] Cf. Chapter 4.i.ii.

[64] See, for instance, A. Lemon, *Between Two Fires*.

perceived as prestigious – with which poetry seems to be invested in the world of the non Roma.[65] The search for specific textual echoes is further complicated by the very nature of literature, which has been effectively defined as a 'tissue of quotations'.[66] Nevertheless, it is possible to highlight several 'family resemblances' between Romani and Italian literary tradition, as well as some examples of literary 'calques' and original reinterpretations of themes and images resembling the representations of the 'fictional Gypsy'. For the purpose of this study, I will situate the multiple forms of textual hybridization alongside a virtual continuum. At one extreme of the continuum there are texts which draw heavily from Italian literature; at the other extreme we find compositions which could be defined as un-poetical, characterized by the 'intrusion' of spoken and informal language.[67] What is worth emphasizing is that in all these cases Romani poets, far from being victims of a textual 'colonization', are involved in a creative interaction with the literary tradition of the dominant society.

A good example of this form of *bricolage* is represented by the poems by Santino Spinelli. In most of Spinelli's poems, death is described as a 'dark night' (*sera buia*), a 'dark road', and also as a 'gloomy sky without moon or stars' (*cielo tetro senza luna e senza stelle*).[68] The condition of the dead is interpreted in terms of absence of pain, joy and hunger, a dimension in drastic contrast to life's radiance and

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[65] The positive attitude of the Roma toward the poetic mode should probably be read as a tacit recognition of the 'authority' provided by the written medium and by particular textual structures. This conception of poetry is clearly instrumental as it entails an emphasis on the medium, rather than the message conveyed by the text. On the instrumental use of writing in traditional society, see Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques* (pp. 288-293); on the conception of writing among the Roma see Chapter 3 of this study.

[66] See Barthes' 'The Death of the Author', p. 146. On the theory of intertextuality see also M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, and J. Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A semiotic approach to literature and art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981).

[67] See especially the texts by Mansueto Levacovich.

[68] See the poem *Defunto*, in S. Spinelli, *Romanipé/Ziganità*, p.53.

dynamism. But the arrival of the 'lady of silence', says the poet, should not be regarded as a traumatic experience. The advent of death is, after all, part of an inexorable process through which humans are re-absorbed into the wider realm of nature. The materialist conception displayed by this author is effectively underlined by the reference to pre-Romantic and Romantic Italian poets:

MERIBBÈ[69]

Mai avèk mi štì šunàv
i šukuàr gilì
tri li čiliklè puraddè,
ta u tatipè
tri jàkh phralèngr
opràl ki murtì kalì mirì
ni štì šunàv avèkie;
i dùt puraddì tri čion parnì
tatri li tikinè duturià
andrè u givibbè laččiò mirò,
mai avèkie mi štì ridikkàv,
ta u šukuàr bašiaddipè
tr' purkanì bašialì mai avèkie
ningirelammàng li ratià laččià
pašè li vašt tri jakh tatì.
Mi štì nakkèl i vuddar mirì
ta u mrù nàv purkanò mi štì lèl,
andrè u bar ništipè kalò
a ningirelammàngl.

MORTE

Mai più ascolterò
il grazioso canto
dei liberi uccellini,
né il fraterno calore
del fuoco
sulla mia pelle scura
mai più sentirò;
la festosa luce della bianca luna
e delle piccole stelle
nella mia vita spensierata

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[69] DEATH. Nor shall I listen / to the graceful song / of free birds, / nor shall I feel / the familiar warmth / of the fire / on my dark skin; / I shall no longer see / in my carefree life / the joyful light of the white moon / and of the little stars, / and the sweet melody / of the ancient violin / will not comfort my quiet nights around the fire. / She will cross my threshold / and take away my ancient name, / she will take it / into the eternal, dark nothingness. From S. Spinelli, *Romanipé/Ziganità*, pp. 68-69; *romanes* and Italian version by the author, my translation.

mai più rivedrò,
né il dolce suono
del vecchio violino mai più
accompagnerà le mie notti serene
abbracciate al calore del fuoco.
Varcherà la mia soglia
e il mio antico nome prenderà,
nell'eterna oscura nullità
lo porterà.

In this text we can detect the influence of Italian pre-Romantic and Romantic poetry. The incipit of the poem recalls the opening line of the famous Zacynthos sonnet '*Nè più mai toccherò le sacre sponde*' (Nor shall I touch again the sacred shores), and in the epilogue there is a direct reference to the Foscolian '*nulla eterno*' (eternal nothingness). The image of the 'dark nothingness'[70] taking away the name of the dead brings to mind the closing lines of Leopardi's *Bruto Minor*: '*E l'aura il nome e la memoria accoglia*' (Let the wind receive my name and memory; line 120). Furthermore, the intertextual structure of the poem may be examined in the light of a deep affinity between two conceptions of death: the mechanistic and materialistic philosophy which inspired much of Foscolo and Leopardi's works is here purposely – and successfully – employed in order to convey an interpretation of death as total annihilation. The following text refers to death in metaphorical terms, as lack of human warmth and as refusal to establish a constructive relation with the Other:

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[70] See the *nere ombre* in Leopardi's *Bruto Minor*, line 45.

CHAVO TAR LI XENE KA NA DIKHÈMBE[71]

Dat,
luló tuth ninguèle
tar i ćući nasfalì...
śutarèle o muj, maśkuzinele i bokh.
Dat,
o ive parnó śurdó tri Đelatùre
perèle tar o thèm zuralé
ta ćharèle i murtì kalì tar o tatipé.
Dat,
o graśt, o graśt dukhaddó
na naśele kringià
o śurdipé parnò kerèppe tuth śutalò.
Dat,
i ćare phabbardì tar i ćikh prixalì
na dèle ćići,
bravàle zoralé a risène ko kane langané.
Dat,
andré ćikh melalì li phré xaddé tatarèmbe
li brišíndé baré sar i jardikh ka biandevèle a khiàle
vitsikenèle o dommò banjardò.
Dat,
andré śurdì ràt i ćikh liśdrale sassarì
duràle śuneppe ankor
o tikinódox tar i basalì pirdì tri puśì.
Dat,
i bravale bi sovibbé tsiddèle li bàle
i kalì ćhone sa xrìvie
lèle li khiá.
Dat,
i gili tar li ćiliklé murraddé
kotare li śukhé rukh tri maslilì
dukhavele o tikinò sovibbé barò.
Dat,
o kham, o kham sa jag loli
si sar ni pallòne phabbardò
śukhiarèle o sabbé sapanò tar o rovibbé.

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[71] SON OF THE INVISIBLE PEOPLE Father, / drops of milk red with blood / gush from the diseased breast... / they sour the palate and revolt the appetite. / Father, / white snow cold frost / descends from the violent sky / to cover black skin with heat... / Father, / the horse, the wounded horse / gallops gaining no winning-posts / foaming sweat transformed into hearing. / Father, / putrefying feet warming in the mud / battering rains like wild nettles / scourge the twisted back. / Father, / in the frozen night all the earth trembles / the shrieking throat of the dusty violin / still echoes in the distance. / Father, / sleepless wind uproots hair / hateblackened moon blinds. / Father, / the hoarse song of plucked birds / on dessicated olive twigs / torments brief eternal rest. / Father, / the sun, the sun red with fire / is a blazing ball / it dries the smile wet with tears. / Father, / Romani song is repeating lamentation / it comes forward, labours and dances / sweet prolonged pain. / Father, / lighting like fiery blades / batters pitiless / rending the famished belly. / Father, / the salt sea drowns / wise poverty dogpaddles / eyes of wood fix images of cities already dead. / Father, / rivers of weeping sob / sweeping away arcane melodies / as storms bathe naked bodies gasping. / Father, / infinite darkness bears light and justice / in equal measure / mute silence speaks of perpetual love. / Father, / grant me a glance with the eyes of one who does not want to see / to fade indelibly / completely dissolve / enfolded within the invisible people. Poem published in *romanes* and Italian in the collection *Baxtaló Drom / Felice Cammino vol. III*; English translation by S. ni Shuinéar.

Dat,
i gilì romanì a si ni dùkheme ka rivèle
a vele anglé kinì ta kelele
ni bàr dukhipé nguldò.
Dat,
li fulmène sàr ćurià phabbardià
a vène tilé bikamlipé
ćirnène i pòre bokhalì.
Dat,
o drijàve londò tassavèppe
o laćho ćororipé na véle anglé
khià tri veś dikhène disià mulé.
Dat,
lène tri rovibbé rovène
purkané baśaddipé ka lène ta tsiddène
sar baré briśindé sapanarène liśdrandònn Đené nangé.
Dat,
o barò kalipé dèle duth ta kriss
sa andré jekh miśtipé,
o bićhibbengre kwitipé vakerèle tar o miśtipé barò.
Dat,
ni dikhipé démmengi li khiá tri kòne ni ma dikhène
pi ta Đavammàng khiàle sassarò maśkaràle
ki li kakhiá tar li Đene ka na dikhèmbe.

FIGLIO DEL POPOLO INVISIBILE

Padre,
gocce di latte rosso di sangue
sgorgano dal seno malato...
inacidiscono il palato, disgustano l'appetito.
Padre,
la neve scende bianca fredda di gelo
scende dal cielo violento
a coprire la pelle nera di caldo.
Padre,
il cavallo, il cavallo ferito
non galoppa traguardi
schiumoso il sudore si trasmuta in acido latte.
Padre,
l'erba arsa dalla terra avida
non emoziona calore,
turbini irrefrenabili arrivano all'udito zoppicanti.
Padre,
nel fango i piedi putrefatti si scaldano
le piogge battenti come ortiche selvatiche
fustigano il dorso ingobbito.
Padre,
nella notte gelida la terra trema tutta
lontano echeggia ancora
la stridula gola del polveroso violino.
Padre,
il vento insonne sradica i capelli
la luna nera di odio acceca la vista.

Padre,
il canto rauco di uccelli spennati
dai rinsecchiti rami d'ulivo
tormenta il breve sonno eterno.
Padre,
il sole, il sole rosso di fuoco
è una palla ardente
prosciuga il sorriso bagnato di lacrime.
Padre,
il canto romanó è un reiterato lamento
avanza s'affanna e danza
un dolce prolungato dolore.
Padre,
i fulmini come lame roventi
si abbattono impietosi
squarciano il ventre affamato.
Padre,
il mare salato affoga
la saggia miseria annaspa
occhi di bosco fissano immagini di città già morte.
Padre,
i fiumi di pianto singhiozzano
travolgenti arcane melodie
come tempeste bagnano ansimanti nudi corpi.
Padre,
l'oscurità infinita reca luce e giustizia
in egual benefica misura,
il muto silenzio parla d'amore perenne.
Padre,
lo sguardo concedimi con gli occhi di chi non vuol vedere
per svanire indelebile completamente diluito
tra le pieghe del popolo invisibile.

In this poem the elements and the landscape are heavily invested with a symbolic connotation. Nature, which for most Romani poets represents a privileged interlocutor, a motherly and sympathetic entity, appears strangely harsh and hostile. Her traditional function is completely reversed: instead of acting as a mother, she refuses to give man nourishment, warmth and comfort. Instead of soothing the sorrows of the Rom and relieving his/her feeling of despair and alienation, Nature seems to reflect and propagate the evils which torment human society; lack of solidarity, incapability of communication and mutual understanding. The hardness and devastation which affect the natural order are therefore a symbolic reflection of the degraded features of human relationships. It is the man's heart which is ice-cold

and lifeless. It is man that is full of hatred, tearful and sleepless. The shift in the usual Romani view of the natural world could hardly be more dramatic: while in most literary works Nature is depicted as a refuge against the hostility of the Gağe, here the only consolation left for the Rom is death, total annihilation (line 53). In this case it is not man that pursues a healing symbiosis with Nature, but it is Nature that mirrors man's misery and degradation.

The images used by the poet grant an apocalyptic tone to the text, which is a mosaic of oxymora, anaphoras and synaesthesias. The poem itself could be read as an hallucinatory vision whose meaning is strictly related to the condition of the Roma living among the Gağe. In such context, the colours used in the poem bear an *emotive*, not a naturalistic meaning, which turns them into sinister signs of a curse: milk is 'red with blood' (line 2), the sun is 'red with fire', a 'blazing ball' (lines 33-34), and darkness is 'infinite' (line 53). Some of the techniques employed in this poem closely resemble those used in surrealist poetry and may also be likened to the hallucinatory verses of the expressionists, especially with regard to the apocalyptic atmosphere, the violent distortion of objects and natural elements, the use of colour to convey intensive emotional states and feelings of anguish and horror. As for links to the Italian literary tradition, we find striking similarities between Spinelli's work and hermetic poetry. More specifically, we notice a fundamental analogy between the poetic *Weltanschauung* of this Romani author and the conception of the Man/Nature relationship as found in Montale's poetry, where Nature's harsh connotation is used to symbolize the hopelessness of the human condition.[72]

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[72] See especially Montale's collections *Ossi di seppia* (1929) and *Le occasioni* (1939). With regard to Spinelli's large use of analogy and synaesthesia see Ungaretti's poetics; as for more specific intertextual reference to hermetic poetry, see in particular the poems by Quasimodo.

Underneath this close web of textual effects and the baroque accumulation of rhetorical figures, it is possible to identify a core of key-images which are unmistakably related to the Roma's symbolic universe: the 'wounded horse' (line 10), the 'dusty violin' (line 24), the wind (line 26), the moon (line 27) and especially the 'Romani song' (line 37), which, despite being reduced to a 'repeating lamentation', keeps resounding with its arcane melodies (line 50). It is important to point out that these 'ethnically connotated' images are not obscured and 'weakened' by the influence of the Gağe's literary tradition; quite the opposite. The techniques employed by the poet are aimed at *increasing* their symbolic significance. Romani themes and images are skilfully interwoven with the elements of the landscape – as if to signify their closeness to the natural world – and intentionally reversed and disfigured to enhance the perverted effects of violence and racism.

The above-mentioned forms of 'explicit' hybridity are rather uncommon among Romani poets, as in most cases the authors are unable to identify and reproduce precisely their textual sources. On many occasions, the use of poetic images and rhetorical devices is consciously avoided in favour of a 'realistic' use of language – which may be considered a sort of rhetorical move in itself. As a matter of fact, the influence of mainstream literary traditions may greatly vary in relation to a number of different factors, such as for instance the authors' educational attainment, the competing influence of authoctonous oral traditions and, last but not least, the personal background of the poets and their individual style. However, there seems to be a recurrent pattern in the use of intertextual resources by Romani authors. Instances of textual hybridization are to be found especially in 'engaged' texts (see Chapter 4.i). It is as if Romani poets tended to rely on 'hybrid' images and linguistic interferences to symbolically 'signify' and bring to light some controversial (and

usually neglected) issues concerning the Roma/Gağe relationship: the enduring denial of their ethnic identity, the infringement of Romani human rights, the condition of social marginalization suffered by the Roma. In all these cases the use of linguistic and cultural codes that are 'familiar' to the non-Roma enable the authors to 'get the message across', in other words, to target directly and effectively the Gağe readership.[73] What is more, the Roma do not limit themselves to passively reproduce the language and the literary tradition of the Gağe, but they often 'subvert' them and consciously bring them to extremes. In the poems devoted to the Holocaust (see Chapter 4.i.iii) the use of surrealistic images is aimed at highlighting the atrocities perpetrated against the Romani people under the Nazi regime. Similarly, poems which describe the effects of violence and social discrimination toward the Roma make use of a language rich in anaphoras and emphatic interjections. Quite meaningfully, the presence of the Gağe playes a fundamental role in such texts. In most cases, the Gağe are addressed explicitly and function as interlocutors with whom the Romani poet engages in bitter verbal exchanges.[74]

The large variety of textual strategies mentioned above clearly defies the enduring attempts on the part of the Gağe to dismiss Romani literature as mere 'copying'.[75] As recently pointed out by Hancock with regard to the misleading views on Romani language, there is a persistent belief among the Gağe that the Roma are inclined to mimic and 'steal' elements of other cultures instead of producing their original ones. In their discussion of the non-native element in the Romani vocabulary, Gağe authors define the borrowing from non-Romani languages in terms of 'lexical thefts',

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[73] See the concept of 'familiarization' proposed by G. Romani in her article 'Italian Identity and Immigrant Writing', in S. Matteo (ed.), *ItaliAfrica: Bridging Continents and Cultures* (New York: Forum Italicum, 2001), pp. 363-375 (p. 369).

[74] See in particular Chapter 4.i.i and this Chapter, pp. 294-6.

[75] See in this regard J. Okely, 'Cultural ingenuity and travelling autonomy: not copying, just choosing', in T. Acton and G. Mundy, (eds), *Romani Culture and Gypsy identity*, pp. 190-205.

regardless of the fact that external borrowing is a fundamental aspect in the formation of all languages.[76] As shown by Hancock, this view is profoundly biased by a number of stereotypical preconceptions about the deceitful nature of the 'Gypsies'. What is more, the belief that 'Gypsies' 'steal' elements from other cultures has also been extended to Romani arts, occupations and religious beliefs, giving rise to a wide range of recurrent stereotypes on Gypsies that have remained practically unaltered over the last few centuries. In an article devoted to the representation of 'Gypsies' in encyclopaedias, [77] Wim Willems and Leo Lucassen provide us with some of these stereotypical images, ranging from physical to moral and religious characterization. 'Gypsies' are usually presented as thievish, deceitful and uncivilized:

> the general opinion is that Gypsies do not lack cleverness, but because of their upbringing and low morality, this characteristic usually develops into slyness. And this, in particular, helps them in stealing and committing fraud. They are trained from a very early age, and they subsequently develop a great dexterity in these skills. ... Because Gypsies (generally) are supposed to lack notions of morality, they would allow their instincts to rule them more easily, have no sense of honour, are greedy, wasteful, intemperate with food and drink, lecherous and frivolous.[78]

They are also regarded as immoral, cruel and lacking religious feelings. Allegations and speculations of incest, cannibalism and child-stealing have endured well into the twentieth century. Even in the domains where 'Gypsies' are actually attributed some positive traits, such as their artistic and musical merits, they are denied any originality of their own and they are said to be good at imitating and reinterpreting rather than 'creating'. Due to a subtle mechanism of aprioristic detraction, the Roma are

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[76] See I. Hancock, 'Duty and Beauty, Possession and Truth: "Lexical Impoverishment" as Control', in Tong, D., ed., *Gypsies. An Interdisciplinary Reader* (New York: Garland, 1998).
[77] See L. Lucassen, W. Willems and A. Cottaar (eds), *Gypsies and Other Itinerant Groups: A Socio-historical Approach* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 35-52.
[78] Lucassen, Willems and Cottaar, *Gypsies and Other Itinerant Groups*, p. 40.

categorically excluded from the realm of 'authentic' art, as if they were affected by some congenital deficiency inhibiting the autonomy of their inspiration.

> [...] Gypsy music is seen more as a specific way of performing, a style of singing and playing that already exists among the local population, rather than as an indigenous music which belongs to the tradition brought along by the travelling musicians themselves. [...] On the one hand then, there is a laudatory emphasis on the fact that all Gypsy music has an expressive vitality in common, and that Gypsies saw to it that the Spanish flamenco was handed down. On the other hand, it is claimed again and again, particularly during the past few decades, that they do not possess an original musical culture.[79]

As far as their literary creations are concerned, the 'Gypsies' are not attributed any literary tradition at all, and their patrimony of folk-tales and songs is dismissed as irrelevant and lacking originality.

To this day, Romani literature has been generally classified under the label of 'primitive'. The Gağe scholars who have concerned themselves with the study of Romani culture have generally paid more attention to oral narratives, rather than the written production, looking at these cultural manifestations as some kind of ethnic 'relics'.[80] Those who have specifically dealt with Romani written poetry tend to reinforce an image of Romani literature as 'naïve', 'natural' and 'genuine' (see Chapter 3.iii). As we have seen, the impression produced by this approach is that for Romani authors writing is a sort of uninterrupted flow stemming directly from their soul, as a sort of 'reflex action', and is tacitly opposed to a more sophisticated conception of writing, monopolized by the Gağe. Such a view is no longer tenable, as it completely overshadows the internal differentiation and the dynamic features of Romani literature. In particular, the Roma's use of textual hybridization is far from producing simple 'tissues of quotations' with no life of their own. The nature of this

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[79] Lucassen, Willems and Cottaar, *Gypsies and Other Itinerant Groups*, p.49.

[80] See especially the attitude of early Gypsiologists discussed in Mayall's study on Gypsy-travellers in the nineteenth century (1988).

(intentional) hybridity, in fact, is profoundly dialogical and is mostly aimed at challenging and modifying a monolithic, ethnocentric view of the Roma and their culture. It is on this particular aspect of hybridization that I will focus in the concluding paragraphs, where I emphasize the link between such textual strategy and the emergence of discursive forms which seem to move away from traditional binary patterns.

(iii) The progressive discovery of writing as a site for negotiation

Earlier in this chapter I have argued that the boundaries between cultures are 'permeable' and characterized by continual intersection and crossing-over, and thus identifiable as functions of a process rather than as some empirical realities. By the same token, literatures from different cultural contexts are not clearly delimited areas, culturally and ethnically homogeneous. The study of the hybrid, dynamic nature of the relationship linking up Gağe's literary representations and Roma's self-representations contributes to highlight a crucial aspect of Romani identity: its *creative* manipulation of images and features which are closely connected with the cultural and social paradigm of the dominant society. In this closing section I intend to demonstrate how textual hybridity, processes of literary 'bricolage' and reflexive use of writing may lead to the identification of new 'spaces of negotiation' of Romani identities.[81]

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[81] I use purposely the term 'negotiation' with reference to Romani literature in order to emphasize the dialogical nature of this production. A similar use of this term is proposed by Bhabha, who writes about the 'negotiation of contradictory and antagonistic instances that open up hybrid sites and objectives of struggle' (1994, 25).

The first part of this thesis is concerned with a range of texts – both fictional and non-fictional – through which the 'Gypsies' have been constructed and fixed in the imagination of Western European society. Writing has played a crucial role in producing stereotypical, monolithic representations aimed at *creating* and *reinforcing* a radical distinction between the dominant society and the 'Gypsies' as radical Others. As Remotti points out

> Il testo scritto è qualcosa che inchioda l'identità, che la stacca dal 'flusso' (A) e dal turbinio delle possibilità alternative (B), per fissarla in una forma perenne (o quasi), in una forma comunque che si è tecnologicamente armata [...] per cercare di sfidare il tempo.[82]

Writing has greatly contributed to the spread and perpetuation of a version of 'Gypsy' identity invented by the Gağe to serve anti-'Gypsy' policies. On the other hand, the Roma's use of writing testifies to a reaction to this process of invention, an effort to elaborate a set of different images able to counterbalance the misleading images of the Gağe. As already seen, this has not just meant a mere *negation* of the stereotypes. By simply *opposing* the stereotype, the Roma would have remained victims of the binary logic that gave rise to the 'Gypsies'. Instead, they have partially re-used and re-interpreted the elements of the fictional identity that the Gağe have imposed on them. In other words, they have not just *negated* the fictional 'Gypsy', but they have *taken possession* of that image for their own use. In their case, writing has functioned not as a means to fix their diversity into rigid categories, but to reflect metacognitively on the process of fictionalization to which their identity has been subjected. Let us recall here the poem by Šemšo Advić *Rać Perel* (The night is falling) already discussed in Chapter 4: '*Bešav the dikhav but řomane kampine / kalipé, / ni dikhinjavol o naj paša jakhá, / angla svako kampina*

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[82] F. Remotti, *Contro l'identità*, p. 54.

phabol e jag (I sit and watch the Gypsy caravans / it is dark, / a fire is burning in front of each cart).[83] The poet portrays himself as external to the scene of the Gypsy camp. This displacement, this 'detachment' of the author from the text – and somehow also from his own people – is made possible by the written medium and enables him to engage in a dialogue with the readers of the poem. He seems to warn us against any reading of the Romani way of life as simple and unproblematic: 'What you see is not "real", but is rather the result of an act of fictionalization', says the poet. It may sound like a paradox that the Roma should construct an image of themselves as 'real' to the eyes of the Gağe through the manipulation of fictional and literary images, a contradiction well-expressed in this poem by Jimmy Story:

NEW ROM[84]

Who are we,
Roma without Romanes
who must read
our own history
in another tongue,
follow the butterfly
of our own being
across maps of imagination
trying to recreate
the lost structure
of our soul?

We are your children,
You, who fought battles,
traded metal, horses,
dreams and tongues
in order to survive;
who told the Magnificent Lie
and ended up in chains
as galley slaves,
deportees
outlaws and brigands
in ashes and in lime.

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[83] From the collection *Poesie*; my translation.
[84] From S. Spinelli (ed.), *Baxtalo Drom / Felice Cammino II*, p. 149-150. Written and published only in the English version.

If we learn Romanes
from books and not
our mother's breast
it is only because
the long cloak of assimilation
the rubber stamp of jackboots
and the mask of shame
almost destroyed
the butterfly's fragile wings.

If we travel in aeroplanes
rather than *vurdon*[85]
it is because
our journey has taken us
so far apart.

We read the future
from a fax machine
and not a crystal ball.

If we reconstruct history
from dust and ashes
it is because this dust
came from our own feet
and the ashes from our bones.

A good way to explain this paradox could consist of looking back at the history of the Roma/Gağe relationship and especially at the unchallenged popularity enjoyed by the fictional 'Gypsy'. It seems rather unlikely that, in the course of their centuries-old coexistence with the Gağe, the Roma have simply ignored this large-scale phenomenon. Far from being the passive bearers of the Gağe's stereotypes, many Roma were certainly aware of them and may have tried to *make some use* of them. To a certain extent, as Hancock suggests, the Roma have taken advantage of the Gağe's 'camouflage' of their ethnic diversity.

> Misleading representation[s] from within the Romani community [serve] as a shield; it is believed that if inquisitive non-Gypsies are busy pursuing the myth, they will leave the real thing alone.[86]

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[85] Caravan.
[86] I. Hancock, 'The function of the Gypsy myth', in *Roma*, 27 (1987), 35-44 (p. 42).

The emergence of Romani literature seems to be related to this process of manipulation and 'negotiation' of the Gağe's stereotypes; it is aimed at a critical reappraisal of Romani identity. A typical 'site' of this critical reappropriation is to be found in the poems which deal with Roma's ethnic•self-representations. The poem *Kriss!* (Justice) by Santino Spinelli, first published in a bilingual version (*romanes* and Italian) and subsequently published (in English) in the popular collection *The Roads of the Roma*, is a pertinent example here. This poem – whose nature is clearly 'hybrid' and 'intertextual' – refers to a representation of Romani ethnic identity which bears significant similarities with the Gağe's essentialist theorization of ethnicity.

KRISS![87]

Duràl lulò indjàn
ta piriès andrè lulò italjàn,
na ljàn maj u làv
ta ğivèl li ğinè,
tu ka ğinè ta ğinè
a maskàrjàn.
Piriàn sàr ni len
avrì tri kulà dat
ta čilè,
ta fòs ta lèn
a piriàn ki li rovibbè
tri li romnià laččià.
Ğià andrè li guddià kiù ìssie
kèr barò u jilò romanò
phèn li làv fiddér
ki li čiavè tirè tarnè
ta čit andrè u ijlò tru
thèm barò.
U mukklipè bi jilò ningà
ta lukkinè pri šdinò
u čior nàv
ka u bar dilinipè a 'ngarajà
ta i tu,

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[87] From S. Spinelli, *Romanipè / Ziganità*. JUSTICE. Distant Indian blood / that irrigates Italic veins / never fed by the word / that regulates people / peoples and peoples that you, / you mixed together, / you dumped into the rivers / of our fathers from time / past, / and furrows and streams / you filled with tears / of honest women. / Winding through the highest minds / the Romani sentiment grew / murmuring the best words / to your young sons / and reaching the heart / of eternity. / Inhuman indifference annuls / and cries out loud / the simple word / that the fanatic mob kept hidden / and that you, blood of my blood, never knew! (trans. into English by Minna Proctor).

lulò trù mrù lulò,
na biğikariàn!

GIUSTIZIA

Lontano sangue indiano
che irrori italiche vene,
mai nutrito di parola
che regola i popoli,
tu che popoli e popoli
hai mischiato.
Sgorgasti a fiumi
dai padri dei tempi
andati,
e solchi e rii
colmasti con le lacrime
di oneste donne.
Serpeggia nelle menti più eccelse
accresci il sentimento tsigano
mormora le parole migliori
ai tuoi giovani figli
e raggiungi il cuore
dell'eternità.
La disumana indifferenza cancella
e grida in alto
la semplice parola
che la fanatica follia ha nascosto
e che tu,
sangue del mio sangue,
non hai mai conosciuto!

The poet's insistence on the concept of 'Indian blood' is the key element on which I wish to focus. The belief in a biological link between the Roma and groups currently living in India[88] has gained wide currency among Romani intellectuals and is at the heart of their conception of Romanipé – although not fully congruent with the Roma's 'popular' views on the subject. As seen earlier in this chapter, the attempt to trace back the origin of the Roma to an Indian motherland was first made by the Gağe in their search for the 'true Gypsy'. Theories about 'race' and the biological foundation of ethnic identity have also been applied by the Gağe to the

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[88] The Banjara, who 'believe that they represent the descendants of the Roma who never left India' and 'maintain contact with Romani groups in Europe and America'. See I. Hancock, *A Handbook of Vlax Romani*, p. 24.

'Gypsies'.[89] How should we read this open reference to theories and categories which provided the theoretical basis for the genocide and the perduring racial discrimination of the Romani people? Let us go back to Spinelli's poem. This text is conceived and structured as a sort of appeal (justice!), a reaction to the indifference (defined as 'inhuman') of the Gağe towards the conditions of the Roma. To the Italian reader, the expression is evocative of the 'divine Indifference' to which Montale refers in the poem *Spesso il male di vivere* and epitomizes a pessimistic conception of the human condition as characterized by suffering and violence. The nihilistic vision echoed in the poem underlines the inhumanity at the root of the Gağe's attitude toward the Roma: a stubborn, inflexible refusal to acknowledge their specific identity and culture. In Chapters 1 and 2, I examined the most recurrent strategies adopted by the Gağe against the Roma, which consisted of reducing their ethnic diversity to the condition of social deviants (Chapter 1) and fictional characters (Chapter 2). It is precisely to this misleading reductionism that Romani poets oppose their 'Indian blood', which is regarded as evidence of the existence of the Roma as an ethnic group.[90]

It may be argued that, by expressing their identity in biological terms, the Roma embrace an essentialist conception of culture which has been deconstructed and 'banned' from the Gağe's sociological discourse on identity after the advent of postmodernist critique. In reality, in this case any accusation of essentialism should be handled very carefully. After being involved in the 'deconstruction' of the image of a people without writing, history and identity (*pars destruens*), the Roma seem to be trying to *create* their own self-image, to make themselves 'subjects' of a political

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[89] See Chapter 1.iv.
[90] See in this regard Chapter 4.ii.

discourse. In order to do so, they seek to provide a basis for their claims and their need to be recognized as a 'real' people, not an imaginary one, as highlighted in this poem by Charlie Smith:

> Real Gypsies live in tents and waggons like in the story books
> They all wear gaudy bright clothes and are dark with devilish good looks
> Selling pegs, paper flowers and chrysanthemums made of wood.
> They're all fortune tellers and sometimes they're pretty good.
> All night they dance around the fire and shake their tambourines,
> Yes, these are the real Gypsies, Oh! Such romantic scenes!
>
> Now hang on a minute and really have a look,
> Come into the real world away from the story book.[91]

For purposes of analysis, the choice of Romani poets and intellectuals to support an essentialist view of their identity may be likened to the attitude of many African-Americans reported by bell hooks in her work *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. hooks refers to blacks' unwillingness to critique essentialism as due to the fear that 'it will cause folks to lose sight of the specific history and experience of African-Americans and the unique sensibilities and culture that arise from that experience'.[92]

Although it is important to be aware of the dangers entailed in the use of essentialist categories and concepts of 'race' and to condemn their use as a justification for discriminatory practices, it is also important to recognize their cohesive function (alongside other categories such as gender, class, nation and so forth), as they may grant individuals with a sense of commonality. In the case of the Roma, essentialism is instrumental in inserting the discourse on Romani identity into the dominant political schemes of the majority society from which they cannot

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[91] From the poem *Real Gypsies* by Charlie Smith, published in the collection *The Spirit of the Flame*, p. 14.

[92] b. hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (London: Turnaround, 1991), p. 29.

transcend. In this context, the reason why some Roma seem to encourage the use of racial and essentialist categories instead of deconstructing them becomes clearer:

> ...One may have an analysis that deconstructs concepts like 'race' and 'nation' as malign fictions, socially constructed within the ideologies of 'racism' and 'nationalism'. But if one is campaigning within the framework of laws about 'Race Relations' or 'National Minorities', one has no option but to claim racial or national status.[93]

The Roma's instrumental affirmation of their ethnic identity is only one aspect of the current reassessment of Romani identity through the use of writing. The written medium – as Clark and Ivanić have rightly pointed out – may perform a range of micro-functions whose purposes are not merely instrumental. Alongside the use of writing for purposes such as maintaining or challenging ideologies, there is a number (virtually infinite) of 'micro-social purposes' for writing.[94] In the next section I will analyse a number of 'personal' uses of writing by Romani female authors, whose texts represent a voice so far unheard of within Romani society.[95]

(iv) The poetic locus of female subjectivity

In every society individuals are engaged in activities entailing the incorporation of their personal identity into broader collective entities, but this does not deprive them of their autonomy and capacity of self-expression. Social engagement is likely to affect and contribute to shape individual behaviour and modes of expression without

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[93] N. Gheorghe and T. Acton, 'Citizens of the world and nowhere', in W. Guy (ed.), *Between Past and Future: The Roma of Central and Eastern Europe* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2001), pp. 54-70 (p. 63).

[94] See Clark and Ivanić, *The Politics of Writing*, pp. 107-133.

[95] Although different in their genesis and purposes, writing for both collective *and* personal purposes are highly illustrative of the crucial function performed by Romani written production in relation to the ongoing reassessment of Romani identity, a reassessment entailing a complex process of negotiation of cultural and ethnic difference. As we will see in the next section, Romani female literature provides us with an example of negotiation of identity through writing which lies at the very heart of Romani society and suggests a radical re-interpretation of the 'marginal' situation of Romani authors.

necessarily undermining the individual's identity. 'Traditional' societies, among which the Roma are usually included, are certainly no exception to this. However important the foundation of a sense of collective identity may be (as in the case of the Romani intelligentsia), the claims of individual identities are no less relevant and imperative. Although Romani authors are clearly engaged in a sort of 'collective undertaking' and are often involved in the activities of the international Romani intelligentsia, they do not simply relinquish their individual identity in favour of a monolithic, pre-established one. In fact, they continue to preserve the autonomy of their personal views and are able to articulate them in a varied, creative manner.

Life in society is a matter of multiple allegiances and multiple roles, for which identity seems to provide a synthetic, coherent unity.[96] When individual and social claims come into conflict, the individual may resort to a number of strategies in order to give voice to his/her needs. The case of Romani female authors is a relevant example of this form of negotiation of personal identity. Though still confined to a small group, there is a clear tendency among literate women to use the written medium as a 'site' of self-expression, despite the severe limitations to which they are subjected. The complexity of this phenomenon urges us to furher clarify our approach to the analysis of Romani female writing. Female writing is not to be conceived as a sort of homogeneous category with unified, single views on society and the condition of Romani women within it, but is rather characterized by a high degree of internal variation. Consequently, any attempt to give a schematic account aimed at describing the female notion of the self among the Roma is doomed to be unduly simplistic. Additionally, it is essential to point out that not all female authors

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[96] On the 'synthetic' function of ethnic identity see A. L. Epstein, *Ethos and Identity: Three Studies in Ethnicity* (London: Tavistock, 1978).

feel the need to manifest a sense of solitude and alienation. Nor do they invariably perceive their position within the group as necessarily problematic. Every author displays a distinctive, personal interpretation of the reality around her that reflects her personal, unique condition. Among this variety of voices it is nevertheless possible to note a sort of common thread, which is strictly related to the broader context of the Gağe/Roma relationship. What seems to characterize much Romani women's writings is a profound sense of displacement, of dislocation, which in some cases is taken to extremes and turned into a self-destructive impulse. The impression given by these texts is that of a stifling oppression, a constraint which is expressed in spatial terms. A Romani woman, say these poets, has no 'space' to be herself, her role is confined to the domestic sphere and is burdened with heavy restrictions. Everything she is must be subordinated to her passive acceptance of this role and her conformity to a series of strict rules of behaviour. In contrast with this situation, these poems reveal a longing for a different way of life, a strong aspiration to self-determination. The female figures are represented in the act of searching for something that lies outside the rigid conventions of their community, a search which is doomed to be unsuccessful: '*nel buio scrivo fiumi di parole / Che nessuno mai leggerà / Che nessuno mai capirà / ... nessuno se ne accorge*' (in the dark I write flows of words / which nobody will ever read / which nobody will ever understand / nobody takes notice).[97]

Texts like this refer to the violent suppression of hope and freedom. They express

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[97] From the poem *La notte non è finita* (The night is not over) published in the collection *La mendicante dei sogni*; my translation.

a profound sense of alienation:

> Ó [sic] Signore guarda il mio cuore
> È diventato pietra
>
> Sento una grande tristezza
> Come vigna colpita da grandine
> Il mio oceano interiore si è prosciugato
> L'ombra inghiotte tutto ciò che penso
> Il mio cuore si perde nel buio
> Sono confusa
> L'universo della tristezza è troppo grande per me
>
> Occhi stanchi
> Luci e ombre combattono l'ultima battaglia del giorno
> Mi spoglio
> Con gli abiti cade un po' di tristezza
> ...Un involucro di pelle e ossa si infila sotto le coperte
> Senza tristezza malinconia solitudine
> Mi sono spogliata
> Anche della mia anima.[98]

At the end of the day, it is not a human being, but an '*involucro di pelle e ossa*' (an empty receptacle of skin and bones) that slips under the blanket.

The impossibility of avoiding these restrictions generates a sense of unworthiness, in some cases a desire for self-annihilation due to the perception of being trapped in an inescapable situation. In this context, writing contributes to an increased awareness of women's condition, to its careful scrutiny, a function directly connected with its reflexive function.[99] The written poem is the medium through which women dig into the innermost depths of their soul, but this scrutiny does not bring to light any unity, any stable 'core' of identity. Rather, it reveals a deep, unbridgeable division at the heart of women's identity.

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[98] Poems from the collection *La mendicante dei sogni*, pp. 10; 12; 34.
[99] See W. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 178-179.

As Fenton puts it

> Minority women have two difficult priorities which are hard to reconcile: recognizing and opposing the racism and discrimination that they and their ethnic brothers experience, whilst opposing their ethnic brothers in the matter of 'traditional' attitudes to women.[100]

Some Romani female poets denounce a loss of identity, an existential drift due to their lack of self-fulfilment. The values of the Romani tradition may indeed provide the association with a 'stronger', collective identity that emerges mainly in opposition to the Gağe. When facing the 'Other', the non-Roma, Romani women seem to have no doubt about their position within the group, as testified by the following poems:

> 'Io sono zingara,
> Una zingara io la regina del creato
> Al mattino con un cenno della mano faccio sorgere il sole
> La pioggia accarezza il mio corpo con la freschezza dei suoi occhi
> La rugiada disseta le mie labbra riempiendomi di profumo intenso d'infinito.
> ...Io zingara sono la libertà tengo la luna in una mano e il sole nell'altra non ho casa né bandiera ma il mondo è ai miei piedi'.[101]

> 'Njigda tut ma ladža,
> kaj kalo Rom sal,
> ...Pre kalji phuv
> o žužodživ barol
> vas o parno maro.
>
> Non vergognarti mai
> di essere un Rom nero,
> ...Dalla terra nera
> nasce il grano
> per il pane bianco.'[102]

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[100] S. Fenton, *Ethnicity*, p. 129.

[101] From the poem 'I am a Gypsy' by Paula Schöpf (only in the Italian version) published in the collection *La mendicante dei sogni*. 'I am a Gypsy / I, a Gypsy, the queen of creation / In the morning with a wave I make the sun rise / The rain caresses my body with the freshness of its eyes / The dew quenches my lips and fills me with the intense scent of infinity / I am a Gypsy, I am freedom, I hold the moon with one hand and the sun with the other / I have no home nor flag but the world is at my feet'; my translation.

[102] Never be ashamed / of being a black Rom, / who cares / if you are a black Rom. Poem by Marta Bandyova published in M. Karpati (ed.), *Zingari ieri e oggi*, p. 208; my translation.

But when their gaze turns around and rests on their individual condition, their self-assertiveness seems to vanish and withdraws under the heavy burden of highly restricting practices. This conflicting position of women within Romani society has been eloquently highlighted by Judith Okely:

> There is a paradox embedded in the Gypsy woman's role. Within her own society she is hedged in by restrictions, expected to be subservient to her husband and cautious with other men. Yet nearly every day she is expected to go out to 'enemy' territory, knock on doors of unknown men.[103]

This continuous crossing of cultural boundaries entails a constant shift within women's identity. As the case of migrant cultures clearly shows, the displacement undergone by migrant subjects implies a number of possible changes in identity, both at the individual and the collective level. The migrant experience may affect identity in many different ways, for example by developing in the migrant a deeper awareness of one's ethnic identity or, on the contrary, by generating a desire to integrate into the dominant society, or even by giving rise to an entirely new identity.[104] By the same token, the constant shifts of identity performed daily by Romani women produce a permanently 'displaced' identity, characterized by a high degree of ambiguity and surrounded with a generalized attitude of mistrust.[105] On the one hand, Romani women are perceived as 'dangerous' by the members of their own group. For this reason, the symbolic space where they move is burdened by a number of taboos and restrictions aimed at protecting the 'boundaries' of the community against the risks of assimilation implied in the constant contact with the

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[103] See J. Okely, 'Gypsy Women: Models in Conflict', pp. 58-59.

[104] See P. White, 'Geography, Literature and Migration', in R. King, J. Connell and P. White (eds.), *Writing Across Worlds*, pp. 1-19.

[105] On the ambiguous role of women as intermediaries see also the figure of the Malinche as discussed by Pratt (1993), and Kidwell's article 'Indian Women as Cultural Mediators' (1992). See also Sandra M. Cypess, *La Malinche in Mexican Literature: From History to Myth* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991).

non-Roma. On the other hand, they are regarded with suspicion by the Gağe, who project onto them a plethora of stereotypical representations centred on their supposedly mischievous, promiscuous and mysterious nature.[106] As a result, Romani women are caught between two cultures that are both hostile and remote from their comprehension.

There seems to be a substantial divergence separating women's writing and the male-dominated discourse. Women's discourse tends to be *centred* on difference, a difference which is not conceived as an abstract notion but is inscribed in their body and is performed in their daily life. On the other hand, the dominant discourse tends to *repress* this *différánce* in favour of an absolute and undifferentiated notion of difference, because, as Barbara Johnson reminds us,

> the differences *between* entities (prose and poetry, man and woman, literature and theory, guilt and innocence) are [...] based on a repression of differences *within* entities, ways in which an entity differs from itself.[107]

As intermediaries between the two cultures, women are required to mediate between different linguistic and symbolic systems, to make them mutually understandable; in other words, to 'translate' them. However, the radical incompatibility between the discourses involved in this act of cultural translation means that this act of translation is never definitive nor complete. In this respect Walter Benjamin's statement according to which 'all translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages'[108] certainly holds true. The constant deferral entailed in this act of cultural translation has severe repercussions on the female identity. Due to their 'double' marginality (as women as

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[106] See for example Mérimée's *Carmen*.

[107] B. Johnson, *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), pp. x-xi.

[108] W. Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), ed. by H. Arendt, trans. by Harry Zorn, p. 75.

well as members of an ethnic minority), Romani women are unable to feel 'at home' in the societies within which they move. This has at least two consequences: these women are forced to inhabit a symbolic 'no-place', a borderline, and this is at the origin of their condition of 'unhomeliness':

> how can one situate oneself on the border? What kind of space characterizes it? In theory, and effectively in practice, borders are neither inside nor outside the territory they define but simply designate the difference between the two. They are not really spaces at all; as the sites of differences between interiority and exteriority, they are points of infinite regression.[109]

The borderline status of Romani women presents also another facet which needs to be mentioned here. It is women's in-between position which enables them to operate across different discursive practices. As pointed out by Godard, 'women's discourse is double: it is the echo of the self and the other, a movement into alterity'.[110] The textual manifestation of the ambivalence of women's discourse consists of a 'polyphonic' text[111] in which the writing subject may be investigated and problematized, a complex, multifaceted voice which moves away from the rigid monologism of the hegemonic discourse. From her position of 'insider-outsider', the Romani woman is able to find alternative ways to express herself and to renegotiate her identity through a number of different strategies. In particular, the conflict underlying women's role and the restrictions imposed on their self-expression are partially circumvented through the use of a number of textual devices, as the

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[109] A. R. JanMohamed, 'Worldliness-without-World, Homelessness-as-Home: Toward a Definition of the Specular Border Intellectual', in M. Sprinker (ed.), *Edward Said: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 96-120 (p.103).

[110] B. Godard, 'Theorizing Feminist Discourse/Translation', in S. Bassnett and A. Lefevere (eds.), *Translation, History and Culture* (London: Pinter, 1990), pp. 87-96 (p. 88).

[111] See Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* and *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*.

following example illustrates:

Ğiuvli Romani,
Ğiuvly Kukori,
sani taśade.

Ğiuvli Romani,
Ğiuvly Kukori,
sagnine ti lako kere su kame,
čingadn po tute
na len sastupine,
na tu sastupinen.

...Hilo Andi them,
andu bersa su avna
iek kutači sa tro,
ti testi ove sar hignias
andre i avri?

Donna Zingara,
Donna Solitudine,
sogni soffocati.

Donna Zingara,
Donna Solitudine,
sogni la libertà,
trovi rimproveri
non li capisci,
non ti capiscono.

...C'è nel mondo dentro il tempo
un angolo tutto tuo
dove essere te stessa
dentro e fuori di te?[112]

The direct expression of female subjectivity is here partially eluded by its substitution for a generic third person. This metaphoric displacement of the subject is also accomplished by its identification with abstract images epitomizing the loneliness and isolation of the female condition (e.g. the suppressed dreams, the torn wings, and the pairing Woman-loneliness). This process is particularly evident also

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[112] Romani woman, / Woman of loneliness, / suppressed dreams. / Romani woman, / Woman of loneliness, / you dream of being free, / you only find reproaches / you do not understand them / they do not understand you. / Is there anywhere in time / a place on your own / where you can be yourself / inside and outside yourself? From the poem *Ğiuvli Romani* (Romani woman), published in a *romanes*/Italian version in S. Spinelli, (ed.), *Šunge luluda / Fiori profumati*; my translation.

in Paula Schöpf's poems, whose titles include key words such as '*amarezza*' (bitterness), '*confusione*' (confusion), '*stanchezza*' (tiredness) and '*rassegnazione*' (resignation). Formally, women's direct self-expression is mitigated by the referential ambiguity of the enunciating subject and the use of abstract, figurative language and the veiled reference to an act of rebellion:

> ...Sono andata contro corrente
> ...Ho rotto i vincoli
> Ho spezzato catene di tradizioni e usanze.[113]

The highlighting of the conflict characterizing the experience of Romani women is certainly one the most striking features emerging from their writings, but there is also a constructive function of writing to be acknowledged. In Chapter 4 I have analysed the role of Romani literature in opposing the stereotype of the Roma as a people 'without history'. In the case of female poetry, the attempt to shed light on Romani history entails also the disclosure of individual life stories usually overshadowed by collective history. In addition to the history of their people, female poets give voice to another unheard story, a silence which is not the result of a lack of meaning but is imposed on them by male-dominated society. It is a silence that carries with it an alternative discourse on the dominant society, as Rasy points out:

> Questo silenzio [...] ha due volti. ...È il segno di una impossibilità di espressione, e dunque della subalternità all'uomo; ma è anche la forma di un diverso tipo di comunicazione, di un altro modo di esprimere se stessa.[114]

Again, the comparison with migrant writing is enlightening here. The literature of migrant groups and Romani written production seem to pursue a similar objective,

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[113] I went against the tide / ...I broke free from the bonds / I broke the chains of customs and traditions. From the poem by Paula Schöpf *Il mio tormento*, published in the collection *La mendicante dei sogni*, p. 44.

[114] 'This silence has two faces. It is the sign of the impossibility to communicate, and therefore of subjugation to men; but is also a different kind of communication, another way to express herself'. E. Rasy, *Le donne e la letteratura* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 2000), p. 26, my translation.

that is, to provide a silent minority with a symbolic space of expression while at the same time trying to challenge the stereotypical representations of the dominant society. With this aim, the use of writing by women is a phenomenon of particular significance for its contribution to the problematizing and diversification of the identity of their people. By engaging themselves in the exploration of their repressed selves, Romani women undermine the Gağe's ethnocentric notion of their group's identity as a compact 'whole', within which the individual's identity is replaced by the generic label of 'Gypsies'. Graziella Parati seems to refer to a similar phenomenon in her discussion of migrant autobiographical writing published in Italy in the early nineties, which she describes as a 'movement toward a plurality of identities'.[115] She contrasts this complex form of identity with the 'essentialistic identification with one identity as representative of one group, or one origin' (p. 271) which is functional to the dominant society.

The marginal position of Romani women, their in-betweenness, appears as a highly creative condition, which is strictly related to the particular features of writing in the Romani social system. Writing, which in Romani society is still a marginal practice (see Chapter 3), seems to grant these women an 'uncharted' territory, a space where they are relatively free to re-write their selves away from patriarchal schemes. The marginality associated with writing practices, together with women's social marginality, acts as a strategic locus of resistance against the imposition of a fixed, uniform group identity. Through the use of writing, women may succeed in

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115 G. Parati, 'Shooting a Changing Culture: Cinema and Immigration in Contemporary Italy', in S. Matteo (ed.), *ItaliAfrica*, pp. 261-280 (p. 271).

affirming themselves as creative *subjects* and resist the imposition of a faceless, depersonalized identity by dialogizing and renegotiating their difference. Moreover, they are likely to devise alternative ways to address 'difference' and 'subalternity' in more general terms. In their daily encounter with the Gaǧe, Romani women have to face the harsh reality of racism and exclusion. But sometimes this encounter may reveal an opportunity to establish a dialogue with the Other. Under the appearance of the rigid Roma/Gaǧe dichotomy, Romani women discover a wider humanity with which they can identify while also 'negotiating' their diversity. This discovery of a wider sense of commonality is strictly connected with the 'liminality' of women in Romani society, a condition characterized by remarkable fluidity and ambiguity, as emphasized by Turner:

> The attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* ('treshold people') are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.[116]

In Turner's view, this status of ambiguity may engender feelings of fear and therefore give rise to a series of rituals and symbolic behaviour aimed at 'containing' and 'neutralizing' the danger implied in this condition. On the other hand, liminality may also play a positive, *creative* role and serve to highlight and explore cultural alternatives. By the same token, the liminality of Romani women – and more in general the 'marginal' location of Romani literature – may contribute to a re-definition of the Gaǧe-Roma relationship that goes beyond a mere polar opposition. The writings by Romani authors (both male and female) are 'ambiguous' and 'equivocal' in the sense that they are not just a re-writing of hetero-ascribed images,

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116 V. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 95.

but they *reinterpret* those images and thus *transform* them. Similarly, the use of literary patterns derived from the 'mainstream' tradition is made hybrid and 'equivocal' by the presence of issues and themes related to specific Romani traditions. The merging of different cultural traditions and *Weltanschauungen* featured in this kind of textual encounter enables us to consider them as interactive realities, not as realities separated by any form of hierarchic logic opposing allegedly 'great' and 'minor' literary traditions. The hybrid logic underlying these texts, which is characterized by a process of mutual interplay rather than a form of hierarchic incorporation, provides us with a crucial tool to reconsider critically the traditional features of the Roma/Gağe relation.

(v) A strategic liminality

Throughout the duration of their presence among the Gağe, the Roma's voice has remained mostly unheard by the majority population. The use of writing by the Roma may be regarded as a significant attempt to 'break' this prolonged silence and to find a new site of resistance and self-expression. In section 5.ii I have pointed out the hybrid structure of such a symbolic site, whose complex features have not yet been fully investigated. In this section I wish to focus in particular on the productive capacity of this 'Third Space of enunciation'[117] opened up by Romani literature, as well as on its close links with the social marginalization of the Roma.

First of all, it is necessary to distinguish between marginality as a *consequence* of the discriminatory practices of the dominant group and a 'strategic' marginality,

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[117] See Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 37.

which in the case of the Roma is functional to specific socio-economic factors.[118] More importantly, we have to consider also a form of marginality which amounts to a political move, 'that marginality one chooses as site of resistance, as location of radical openness and possibility.'[119] This 'counter-hegemonic marginal space' is indeed more suitable to highlight the dynamic nature of Romani self-representations, but it still does not explain in what lies their original, creative contribution. Moreover, such definition of marginality still retains a sense of *negativity*, as we usually refer to the margins in an axiomatic acception, that is, in terms of remoteness from the center of the economic, social and political power. This also tacitly suggests the idea of marginal identities as merely 'oppositional' – the margins are figuratively opposed to one another – a far too reductive conception which is exposed to the fallacy of binary thought.

In order to highlight the creative potential of Romani literary production, I would rather turn to the notion of ritual 'liminality' mentioned above. According to Van Gennep, the interstitial space between the initiate's condition *before* and *after* the ritual is characterized by a high degree of ambiguity and 'anti-structural' behaviour and is generally regarded as dangerous and potentially unsettling.[120] In reality, the subversion of the conventional order enacted in the ritual is not total, but is always partial and temporary.[121]

The creative side of this 'partial' suspension, as pointed out by Turner, lies in the *deconstruction* of what is normally perceived as 'normal' by the members of a

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[118] See Section 3.i.

[119] Cf. b. hooks, *Yearning*, p. 22.

[120] See A. Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, pp. 20-22. It important to note the similarity between the 'liminal condition' highlighted by Van Gennep and Bakhtin's notion of the 'carnivalesque'.

[121] As pointed out by Turner, liminality is not completely 'unconstrained', and 'must bear some traces of its antecedent and subsequent stages'. Cf. E. Turner (ed.), *On the Edge of the Bush: Anthropology as Experience* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985), p. 160.

certain society. By ritually subverting the structure and rules which in social life are generally taken for granted, the *liminal state* highlights what these rules are and, according to some anthropologists, helps control violence and social conflict by reasserting, at the end of the ritual process, the 'normal' order of things.[122] What is worth emphasizing, however, is the fact that the liminal state may also cast some light on the possibility of *another* order and may consequently lead to the formulation of social and cultural structures which are *alternative* to the existing ones.

The concept of liminality may be useful to the study of Romani literature, which is undoubtedly situated in a sort of 'interstitial' space between different – sometimes opposite – literary and cultural paradigms, without being mechanically subjected to any of them. Within it, the dynamic interaction and hybridization of images, tropes and styles perceived as 'authoctonous' with those pertaining to more established and prestigious literary traditions contribute to unmask and deconstruct a number of well-established views and stereotypical notions. To begin with, the features of Romani literature seem to contradict the idea of a linear transition between oral and written forms. As we have seen, there are texts which present a high level of interference between the oral and the written code, such as the transcriptions of Roma's oral narratives performed by the Gağe and the works belonging to the early period of Romani literature.[123] As far as more recent works are concerned, we notice the use of themes drawn from the oral tradition and the strategic adoption of styles and registers highly influenced by spoken language. The interplay between written and

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[122] This approach is typical of structural-functionalism, a major trend in British social anthropology whose main exponents are Reginald Radcliffe-Brown, Meyer Fortes, Max Gluckman and Evans-Pritchard.

[123] See Section 3.ii.ii.

oral forms, however, does not amount to an evolutionary transition: the legacy of orality may still exert its influence on texts largely shaped and structured by the use of the written code. The features of Romani literature seem to undermine also the hierarchic paradigm according to which there is a temporal discrepancy between the creation of a text and its subsequent translation, exemplified by this kind of diagram:

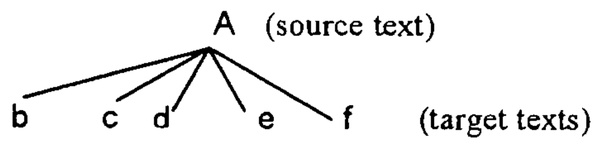

TABLE 2

As seen in Chapter 3, this pattern hardly applies to the case of Romani literature, where we can find texts first written in the languages of the host society and virtually immediately translated by the authors themselves in *romanes*, as well as texts published with a parallel translation in one or more languages. There are even texts whose only version is in the language of the host society, and so forth. A more suitable way to represent the polyglossia characterizing the works by Romani authors could be the following:

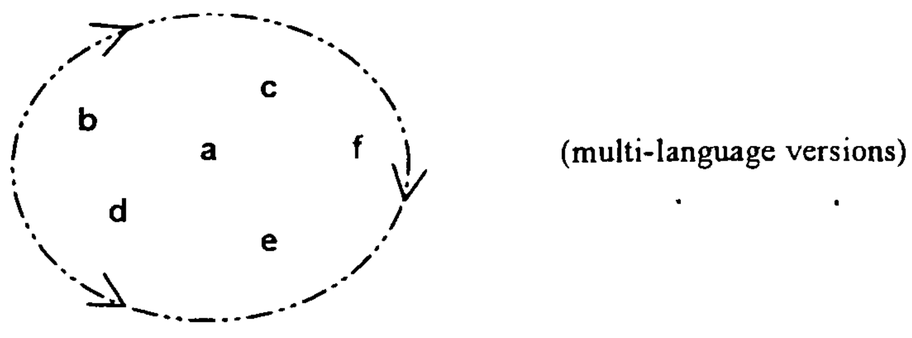

TABLE 3

On a more general level, we notice the use of themes and literary *topoi* that fruitfully intermingle and enhance each other. This confirms the fact that Romani literature, far from being the exclusive 'precipitate' of ethnicity, can be considered a sort of 'condensation' of multiple traditions. Within this complex convergence of

disparate components, the use of images and metaphors devised by the Gağe represents a crucial resource through which the rhetorical and semantic features of the language of the 'dominant' society blend effectively with classical Romani themes. In other words, the hybrid nature of Romani literature does not 'enervate' or 'corrupt' the Romani tradition, nor does it entail the acculturation of Romani authors. On the contrary. Far from being the instrument of a latent strategy of 'cultural colonization', the literary language of the Gağe amplifies the diffusion of Romani culture, emancipating it from the rigid opposition between minority and dominant cultures.

Romani literature is characterized by a relatively unrestricted, free interplay between different semiotic systems, languages and textual traditions. Such dynamic, hybrid structure is clearly incompatible with ethnocentric literary categories based on criteria of 'homogeneity' (from a linguistic, geographical or cultural viewpoint) and 'selectivity'. The hegemonic approach to literature tends to establish a hierarchical opposition between a 'high', 'canonical' form of literature (which reflects the view of the dominant group) and 'non-canonical' literatures produced by minority groups (including women, popular artists, authors from minority cultures and so forth). In other words, it tends to exclude and minimize the influence of alternative, contestative voices which express perspectives outside the dominant one. In Bakhtinian terms, such approach marginalizes *heteroglossia*[124] in favour of a monolithic, 'stable' literary paradigm defined by the exclusion of the 'non-

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[124] Term used by Bakhtin to define the internal stratification of a national language into a multiplicity of 'socio-ideological' languages. 'Heteroglossia' refers in particular to the conflict between 'centripetal' and 'centrifugal', 'official' and 'unofficial' discourses within the same national language. According to Bakhtin, the phenomenon of heteroglossia (which broadly characterizes the world of the self, of language and culture) operates also at a micro-linguistic level and defines the conflict between voices and dialects that individual speakers use in their daily lives. See his 'Discourse in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination*, pp. 262-263.

canonical'.[125] In contrast, Romani literature could be regarded as a typical 'site' of heteroglossia, as it is largely based on the hybridization of different languages and literatures regardless of linguistic and national boundaries.[126] It is an 'interstitial' aesthetic whose relevance is to be found in the original manipulation and reinvention of pre-existing elements (*bricolage*), as well as the unveiling of alternative views on the use of writing by a group traditionally considered as non-literate. In particular, the Romani use of writing contributes to undermine the evolutionary notion of 'primitive' societies as 'frozen' in a sort of pre-literate realm in which the voice of the individual is inevitably 'absorbed' and subdued by a collective anonimity. The example of Romani written production demonstrates that instances of a critical, contestative use of writing as well as more personal uses (see the case of female authors) are not exclusive of advanced, 'modern' societies.

Until now, works by Romani authors have been regarded as literary 'relics', samples of a literature by a 'primitive', vanishing people and the innovative potential of Romani aesthetic has been generally discarded as mere 'copying'.[127] In reality, the bricolage employed by the Roma has proved highly productive and provided them with a *meta* mode whose implications for their identity are quite remarkable. It was this reflexive use of writing that helped raise their consciousness about the stereotypes affecting the Romani people; it is this conscious, critical use of writing that is enabling them to manipulate such stereotypes to their advantage.

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[125] I refer in particular to notions such as those of 'national literature', 'literary canon' and 'canonical genre'. On the critique of these notions within comparative literary theory, see in particular J. Guillory, 'Canonical and non-canonical: A Critique of the Current Debate', *ELH*, 54 (1987), 483-527, B. H. Smith, *Contingencies of Value* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), and W. V. Harris, 'Canonicity', *PMLA*, 106 (1991), 110-121.

[126] This feature of Romani literature indirectly confirms the constructed nature of the notion of the 'literary canon', which is largely (though not exclusively) shaped by power relations and is aimed at legitimating the dominant order.

[127] See Chapter 5.ii.

The creative function of textual hybridity calls for a critical reassessment of our preconceived views of the Roma's use of writing – e.g. the rigid oral/written polarity – and their ability to range over a number of different literary traditions. Furthermore, Romani use of writing in relation to current processes of identity-building undermines any attempt to confine their identity to a monolithic, hetero-ascribed model of ethnicity. As noted above, one of the main factors leading to the marginalization and persecution of the Roma was their alleged 'reluctance' to conform to the dominant social and cultural paradigm. According to this paradigm, the hybrid features of 'Gypsy' culture and way of life were presented as signs of 'deviance' and gave impetus to a number of textual representations of 'Gypsies' as 'mysterious', 'wild' and even 'monstrous' and 'devilish' characters. In reality, as I have tried to demonstrate, the definition of the 'Gypsy' as deviant is to be seen as the result of our monolithic, rigid patterns of identity, rather than the manifestation of some sort of aberrant nature. The perception of 'Gypsies'' 'strangeness' and 'asociality' is a distorted projection of our representational paradigm.

In order to overcome this representational distortion a radically different approach to Romani identity is needed. First of all, it is necessary to 'break the spell' at the root of 'Gypsies' depictions, that is to say, the reliance on fictional images which determined the 'death' of the cultural referent (i. e. the Roma as a 'real' people) by replacing the stereotype with the data derived from ethnographic observation. Phenomena such as the rise of a written Romani literature inject some empirical knowledge into the representation of the 'Gypsies' and help us to reassess our views on Romani culture.

The study of Romani literature provides us with crucial evidence that contradicts persistent stereotypes about 'Gypsies'. More specifically, the textual encounter with

Romani self-representations urges us to reconsider the way in which we generally tend to regard 'difference', as well as the nature of our perception of Otherness. For centuries the image of the 'Gypsies' has been trapped into a sort of categorial 'confinement': that of our binary thought. Although a certain degree of stereotypization is 'inherent' in human cognitive perception of outward reality,[128] exclusive reliance on stereotypical imagery reduces the Other to an empty receptacle of fictional images, as this study has tried to show. A careful analysis of Romani literature contributes to integrate that fictional image with some empirical knowledge of the social practices related to the Roma's use of writing and their interstitial aesthetic. This reassessment requires a drastic change of perspective, a sort of cultural 'turn' in anthropological terms.

Until now, we have 'frozen' the identity of the Romani people in fictional, binary categories in order to control and 'domesticate' their diversity. By doing so, we have pushed the Roma to the edge of our cultural and social system; we have merely dwelt on the differences and discontinuities separating them from the majority society and we have symbolically labelled those differences as 'threatening' and 'anti-structural'. It is, however, also possible to look at the emergence of Romani literature as an invaluable opportunity to interpret *constructively* the liminal, hybrid space as the site for an *encounter*, instead of a site of hegemonic control. This requires that we include the 'emic' perspective, the point of view of the Other, in our representational paradigm. In other words, it is necessary that we integrate our textual knowledge of the 'Gypsies' with its hitherto neglected sociological referent.[129] Arnold Krupat

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[128] See this thesis, p. 8.

[129] See the article by P. Rabinow 'Representations are Social Facts: Modernity and Post-Modernity in Anthropology', in J. Clifford and G. Marcus (eds.), *Writing Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 234-261.

expresses very well the need for a radical re-formulation of the discourse on the Other:

> if one chooses an oppositional mode of proceeding, e.g., *either* the Hopis *or* the Western scientists are 'right,' *either* the Native elders *or* the Western historians are 'right,' it is hard, given our present state of understandings, to know what to do.[130]

Krupat's call for a new 'ethnocriticism' indicates an ongoing search for a 'critical discourse' that moves away from a monologic mode and is based on '*both* Western and indigenous understandings' (p. xx). This urgency is also reflected by the recent critique of anthropological textuality. Anthropologists rightly warn us against the consequence of Western writing practices on the way in which we perceive Alterity.[131] In particular, the risk entailed in 'authoritative', abstract depictions of the Other – what has been named 'monological writing' – is to confine it to the field of the 'exotic', whereas the fundamental objective of anthropology is 'the description of a reality stemming from a "crossing of gazes" between different cultures'.[132] The final aim of anthropological investigation is not the 'appropriation' of other cultures through their textualization: its 'objects' of study are also speaking 'subjects' whose voices cannot be simply erased from the anthropologist's account of their culture. On the other hand, the efforts of the ethnographer are not aimed at reaching a total identification with the Other, which would inhibit any form of anthropological knowledge. What is sought is a dynamic combination of *participation* and external *observation* of other cultures in order to achieve a 'critical', global view of them. Neither the total abolition of difference, nor its radicalization, but a process of comparative analysis of the differences in order to discover the universal similarities

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130 See A. Krupat (ed.), *New Voices in Native American Literary Criticism*, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), p. xxi.

131 Cf. especially J. Fabian, *Time and the Other*, J. Clifford and G. Marcus (eds.), *Writing Culture*, J. Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

132 Cf. T. Todorov, 'Les croisement des cultures', *Communications*, 43 (1986), 5-24.

between human cultures: this is the ultimate goal of the anthropological project. As Rousseau states in his *Essai sur l'origine des langues:*

> Quand on veut étudier les hommes, il faut regarder près de soi; mais pour étudier l'homme, il faut apprendre à porter sa vue au loin; il faut d`abord observer les différences pour découvrir les propriétés.[133]

The relationship with the Other is not merely a matter of opposition, but consists of a complex web of difference *and* similarities. An ethnocentric approach tends to overemphasize (or completely dissolve) the differences to the detriment of the similarities between cultures. On the contrary, the anthropological 'dual gaze' needs to consider both aspects of the relationship in their dynamic intersection. The essential point here is the shift of emphasis towards the *continuities* between human cultures. Cultures are not separate universes with no connection with one another, but are *based* on interaction and sharing of mental schemata, which implies that the boundaries between cultures are inevitably 'fuzzy' and difficult to trace. As pointed out by Piasere

> se la cultura ha confini sfumati, allora significa che nessuna cultura è nettamente delimitata rispetto alle altre e separabile dalle altre. Anzi, ogni persona diventa 'un punto di congiunzione per un infinito numero di culture che si sovrappongono parzialmente'.[134]

We are now in a position to recognize that the common belief in the radical alterity of the 'Gypsies' was largely due to a 'textual manipulation', a strategy aimed at encapsulating their identity in the negative pole of a rigid dichotomy that inhibited any constructive, dialogical interaction with them. In contrast to this strategy, the parallel study of Romani literature may help to identify new, more interactive conceptions of the Roma/Gağe relation. One possible way to achieve this is by

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133 J.-J. Rousseau, *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, cap VIII (1781). Repr. in 1966 by G. Ducros.

134 See L. Piasere, *L'etnografo imperfetto: Esperienza e cognizione in antropologia* (Bari: Laterza, 2002), pp. 80-81.

highlighting the *decontextualizing* and *reflexive* function of writing.[135] It is the decontextualization promoted by writing that has raised the Roma's awareness of the fictional nature of non-Roma's representations and enabled their deconstruction and critical reassessment. The metacognitive reflection on this ethnocentric use of writing discloses the dynamics of the mechanism whereby our identity is constructed in relation to the 'Gypsy' Alterity, that is, through a reiterated process of inverted mirroring and ethnic camouflage. By integrating this critical reflection on acculturative writing practices with the analysis of phenomena such as the emergence of Romani writing, we would be able to avoid the restrictions entailed in this oppositional mode. We would place emphasis not just on what *differentiates* 'Us' from 'Them' – e.g. dichotomies such as people 'with' or 'without writing', 'with' or 'without history' – but on what Gağe and Roma texts have in common, which resides in the creative interplay between different traditions and world views. The comparative study of these texts is a possible key to uncovering the dynamic interchange previously obscured by a thick layer of binary oppositions.

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[135] See Section 4.ii.

CONCLUSIONS

In this thesis I have looked at the conflicting relationship between Roma and non-Roma primarily as a struggle over control of Romani identity. As previously seen, textual representations of the Gağe have played a major role in this struggle. Substantively, the non-Roma have used writing to 'encapsulate' Romani identity into fixed categories of Otherness, which gave rise to the notorious representations of the 'Gypsies' as deviants and sinister, intriguing outsiders. Portrayed as exotic and unfamiliar, the Roma have been pushed to the margins of the dominant social and cultural system. In particular, the prolonged process of literary camouflage of Romani diversity entailed the aesthetic objectification of the 'Gypsies', which contributed to shift the focus from the social context to authoritative texts, shaped in accordance with the dominant ideology. This led to a conflation of aesthetic and social categories aimed at 'dehumanising' the Roma – to use Said's words – in order to justify the Gağe's behaviour toward them.[1] In recent years, a group of Romani intellectuals has begun to overtly challenge this process, while at the same time trying to foster a sense of common identity among the Romani people. Romani poets especially have expressed the need for a critical re-appropriation of their identity, calling for a substantial turn in the representational paradigm imposed on them. This critique of the misleading images forged by the Gağe is of great importance, as it entails recognition of the Gağe's use of textual representations as strategies of dominance within the current system of power

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[1] See Said, *Orientalism*, p. 108.

relations. The Romani linguist Ian Hancock, for instance, has repeatedly identified the creation of a 'Gypsy' myth as a strategy adopted by the dominant society to 'deprive' his people of their identity in order to control them:

> The manipulation by societies in power of the identities of subordinate groups is achieved in many ways. One such way is through discriminatory legislation, such as that enacted against the Romani people in almost every land [...]. Another is through media representation, both factual and fictional.[2]
>
> People who never met a Gypsy in their lives are nevertheless able to provide a fairly detailed picture of how they think Gypsies look and how they live. Their mental image, partly negative and partly romantic but mostly inaccurate, stems from a Romani identity that has become so institutionalized in Western tradition that it has become part of Western cultural heritage.[3]

This awareness of the manipulation of their identity had a major influence on the features and purposes of Romani literary self-representations. In so far as they are aimed at giving voice to an oppressed people, the works by Romani authors represent the effort to affirm themselves as *subjects* – and not mere objects – in the public discourse on their identity.

For many authors the first step towards this self-affirmation has coincided with a negation of the stereotypes and a deconstruction of hetero-ascribed images. This reaction to the fictionalization of their identity, however, needs to be read alongside a more *constructive* process of identity building which is not based on the simple rejection of the stereotype: as already pointed out, the Roma's identification of literature as a site of resistance is not reducible to a mere retaliation against its use as a site of oppression. Similarly, Romani self-representations are not the result of an inverted reflection of the hegemonic representations, but are endowed with their own

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[2] I. Hancock, *Duty and Beauty, Possession and Truth: "Lexical Impoverishment" as Control*, in D. Tong (ed.), *Gypsies. An Interdisciplinary Reader* (New York: Garland, 1998), pp. 115-126 (p. 115).
[3] I. Hancock, 'The Struggle for the Control of Identity.' *The Patrin Web Journal Home Page*. 21 Jan. 2002. 4 Dec. 2002. <http://www. Geoticies.com/Paris/5121/identity.htm>.

specific – and diversified – voice. Some poets may give priority to collective issues whereas others, especially female authors, display a more 'personal' search for their poetic voice, combining the manifestation of Romani identity with the expression of their individual condition. It is important to point out that such self-representations stem from the expression of identities hitherto oppressed and disregarded. To represent their quest for identity, Romani authors refer repeatedly to a 'search', a 'long road', a 'journey', and they express their incapacity to see where this search may ultimately lead. 'Where is the Romani truth?' is the title of a Romani poem by Rasim Sejdić which exemplifies very well the strains and difficulties of this research. *Where* can one ideally trace the border between fiction and reality regarding the Roma? *Where* can one draw the line that separates a truthful representation of the Romani identity from its mystification?

In all probability, this question is destined to remain unanswered. In reality, there is no such thing as a fixed 'location', or an alleged 'stable position' which can be reached and can grant the 'possession' of a definitive knowledge about the Romani people. As for problematic notions such as 'culture' and 'identity', we are bound to recognize that any form of knowledge about the Other is relative and positional, rather than stable and unitary. This means that we might try to define momentarily Romani identity, but only for a specific purpose (as in Wittgenstein's language games). Any interpretation of Romani identity (including self-representations by the Roma) should be seen as provisional and needs to be carefully contextualized and relativized. In fact, the final aim to be pursued is not the attainment of a definitive version of this identity and its features, but rather an effective portrayal of its dialogical structure and internal diversification.

Until now, the dynamic features of Romani identity have been generally suppressed and subordinated to the aims of the dominant ideology; that is to say, a version of the truth about 'Gypsies' (that of the dominant group) has imposed itself as the only acceptable one. This act of appropriation of Romani identity is the origin of misconceptions that affect negatively the relationship between Roma and non-Roma and create a referential void at the core of depictions of the 'Gypsy'. As the case of the 'Gypsy' shows, misconception is most likely to arise in a context where self-definitions are suppressed and identity is alienated from its social referent. The only way to try to overcome the fallacy of representations attached to the Roma is to call them into question and unmask their constructed nature. It is not a matter of 'locating' the truth but 'displacing' it and removing it from the constraints of any rigid categorization. To achieve this, we need first to 'de-authorize' and deconstruct stereotypical representations by unveiling the multivocality which lies at the root of the textual image. The reason for this approach is not to be found in a generic plea for deconstruction, but arises from the constitutive features of Romani identity and from its complex textual manifestation, which urges us to move away from a rigid binary logic.

Romani intellectuals perform a deconstructive critique of hegemonic representations that encapsulate and confine their cultural diversity within reductive categories (highlighted in Chapters 1 and 2). They provide the non-Roma with an image of their people which contrasts dramatically with the stereotypes attributed to the 'Gypsies'. Contrary to the image of a 'people without writing' and with no sense of a separate identity and group membership, the Roma have demonstrated a thorough knowledge of the communication system of the Gağe (see Chapter 3). Far from being a 'primitive' group, frozen in a timeless condition which rejects *a fortiori*

any innovative and creative use of writing, they are able to exploit the communication technologies of the Gağe in order to establish a common Romani language and promote a stronger unity among their people. The recent rise of Romani literature, analysed in Chapter 4, is highly illustrative of this ongoing reassessment of the Romani image. The defining features of this literature, formed by a complex web of intertextual and thematic interconnections between different languages and traditions, are closely related to the dynamic process of negotiation of Romani identity in the social arena. It is only by introducing this dynamic perspective in the context of the enduring struggle for the control of Romani identity (see Chapter 5) that we will finally be able to turn away from the oppositional mode which has hitherto prevented the construction of a positive, dialogic interaction with the Roma.

Undoubtedly, the adoption of a critical, comparative perspective on Romani identity does not guarantee the actual eradication of the stereotypes against the Roma and retains all the limitations typical of a speculative approach. Nevertheless, I regard this kind of reflection as far from otiose. Indeed, it is highly desirable that, if in the past the written code has served strategies of aesthetic reductionism and ethnic 'camouflage', a textual encounter with Romani alterity may now lead to a more constructive dialogue with the Roma. Oppositional, fixed representations of alterity, unhinged and relativized by a cross-cultural perspective are likely to be re-shaped into patterns that are more consonant with the dynamic features of cultural identity. The time has now come to re-discover the Roma as *subjects* with their own voice and views on their position within the majority society. The next necessary step is to give their voices the chance to be heard by the non-Roma and to help reshape the features of the public discourse about them.

A different, constructive approach to the identity of the Roma presupposes a radical change in textual representations by the Gağe. The analysis carried out in the first two chapters has revealed that both 'legalistic' and 'exotic' texts concerned with the 'Gypsy' are replete with an ethnocentric terminology which succeeded in confining the Roma's cultural specificity to a number of reductive labels and textual images. In fifteenth-century chronicles the Roma were defined as the 'ugliest *brood* ever seen', and later accounts depicted them as a 'thievish race', a nondescript 'rabble'. Over the centuries, non-'Gypsies' have described the 'Gypsies' through a number of sweeping categories and archetypal images usually charged with strong symbolic meaning, as for the 'sorcerer' or the 'witch', the 'monster', the 'savage', the 'deviant'. Literary texts are equally replete with the same kind of terminology; let us only recall here Pushkin's 'clamorous throng', Baudelaire's 'tribe of prophets' or the innumerable 'bands' of 'Gypsies' running across a large number of European works of art. On many occasions, we have even noticed a reduction of the 'Gypsy' to nothing but a vague quality – see for example many picturesque and romantic depictions – introduced to add a tinge of exoticism to the text. In all these cases, the Roma have been regarded as some sort of homogeneous 'whole', as symbolic figures, rather than real-life 'subjects'.

At present, the general way to represent and discuss Romani culture and identity is still profoundly ethnocentric. The very term 'Gypsy' (which I have used mainly in opposition to the ethnonym 'Roma') is generally employed as a derogatory term with no consideration for the high degree of internal diversification within Romani identity. The non-Roma continue to write about Roma not as proper subjects, but as the 'Gypsy' 'problem', the 'Gypsy' 'menace', the '*emergenza nomadi*' (nomad's

emergency) and so forth.[4] Because of its infamous legacy, the term 'Gypsy' is now perceived as offensive and discriminatory, at least in the official context. Consequently, we currently witness the coinage of a number of neologisms and expressions such as 'nomads', '*Gens du Voyage*', 'traveller' which, despite being presented as politically 'correct', are no less ambiguous and misleading than the previous definitions. Such expressions are still based on extrinsic categories and are ultimately a projection whose features are functional to the hegemonic system but bear no substantial relation with the social context.

The endurance of these linguistic practices is a clear sign of the tendency, on the part of the Gağe, to rely on their idea of 'Gypsies' when dealing with Romani issues. This kind of language re-enacts the centuries-old displacement of the Roma's identity into generic, abstract categories and perpetuates a range of stereotypical labels which reinforce the primal 'Us'/'Them' opposition. From this point of view, it is possible to affirm that the marginalization of the Roma is also achieved through their exclusion from the linguistic practices regarding them, an exclusion enacted daily in official and legal texts, in the language of literature, politics and the mass media. As a result, the Roma are increasingly de-humanized, de-ethnicized and deprived of their autonomous identity.

The example of the 'Gypsies' shows how linguistic forms, due to a protracted process of ethnocentric labelling, take on a plethora of different, often contradictory connotations which may lead to overambiguation and loss of empirical referentiality.

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[4] On media depictions of 'Gypsies' see Tabucchi's *Gli Zingari e il Rinascimento: Vivere da Rom a Firenze* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1999), M. Revelli, *Fuori luogo: Cronaca di un campo rom* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1999). C. Clark, '"New Age" Travellers: Identity, Sedentarism and Social Security', in T. Acton (ed.), *Gypsy Politics and Traveller Identity* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 1999). pp. 125-141, and R. Morris, 'Gypsies, Travellers and the Media: Press Regulation and Racism in the UK', *Communications Law*, 5 (2000).

Inevitably, images and tropes still resound with the reverberation of former discursive practices concerning 'Gypsies'. Such a phenomenon is inextricably connected with the historical dimension of linguistic meaning, which inevitably reflects past (unsuccessful) attempts to define and 'explain' the 'Gypsies' through a mechanism of generalization of stereotypical traits and removal from social reality. How to put an end to this apparently inexorable semantic 'drift'? At present, there is a pressing need for a thorough reassessment of the Roma/Gağe relation which obviously entails a profound reformulation of the representational paradigm concerning the Roma. To this aim, it is fundamental to promote a better knowledge of Romani social and cultural practices. Some authors have recently proposed strengthening the role of educational institutions to overcome the dimension of the stereotype through the adoption of intercultural projects and the diffusion of a different image of the Roma (Liégeois 1994 and Hancock 2002). Some choose to adopt a socio-economic perspective to the study of Romani history (Willems 1997), while others rightly insist on the necessity of drawing on self-definitions to avoid the effects of the protracted fictionalization of the 'Gypsies' (Sandland 1996). It is my contention that Romani literature is another important source of alternative, 'emic' images and definitions, and needs to be taken into account when referring to the Romani people.

The echo of the past may not be easily removed from the texts and the imagery they evoke, but this does not mean that all textual resources should be necessarily rejected. Alternative literary practices such as those detected in Romani poetry can positively contribute to a reformulation of the 'Gypsy' image and eventually become part of a new representational paradigm. As Romani authors have demonstrated, worn-out images and symbols may be revived and re-used to perform a

reappropriation of symbols and images progressively devoid of their empirical referent. The language employed by these poets – whose depth and intensity are proportionate to the violation of their identity – struggles to establish itself as an alternative to the rarefied, fictitious language of the 'Gypsy'. In a sense, Romani poets manage to bring the trope 'back to life'. It is by according this alternative language its proper place in the public scene that we will finally be able to go beyond the fictional dimension and re-discover, under the mask of the 'Gypsy', the face of the real Rom.

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